

**Lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers: Navigating societal stigmas and barriers  
impeding their pathways to pursue higher education**

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A Capstone Project

Presented to The Faculty of the Fred S. Klipsch Educator's College

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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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### **Abstract**

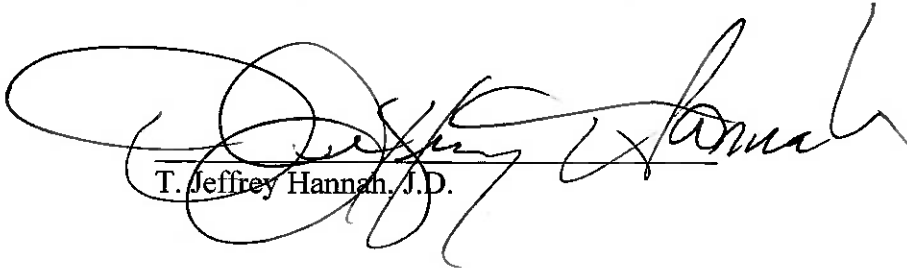
This qualitative research study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers in Indiana, as they navigate their return to the college classroom, given the stigma attached to justice involved individuals and motherhood. While significant research exists on incarcerated mothers, parenting behind bars, family reunification, and external, structural obstacles faced by formerly incarcerated people upon re-entry and their paths to college, there appeared to be little research on the experiences of the post-incarcerated mother, her post-secondary educational journey from prison to college and internal barriers specific to mothers. This study investigated the external obstacles faced by this non-traditional population through their lived experiences and how these obstacles uniquely impacted their fears, insecurities, identities and self-image and the influence of the distinct hardships in pursuing the steps needed to return to college. This study also investigated how equipped institutions of higher education are to serve this population and help to clear their paths, whether by “banning the box” on admissions applications or providing the needed support and services to formerly incarcerated mothers, so they can increase their emotional capacity to pursue their educational goals. Data was collected and analyzed via questionnaires, observations at a live workshop, a group debrief on Webex and one-on-one interviews with workshop participants to understand the impact of the interventions designed for the population of participants and improve the lived experiences of mothers with incarceration experience while pursuing college.

*Keywords:* higher education, post-secondary education, college, motherhood, formerly incarcerated, incarceration experience, stigmatization, self-stigmatization, structural stigma, social stigma, justice involved individual/people, Post Traumatic Prison Disorder, Possible Selves, Self-efficacy Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory and Double Deviant Theory

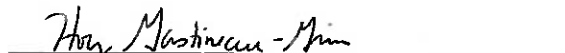
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APPROVAL OF THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

This capstone project, "Lived Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Mothers: Navigating Societal Stigmas and Barriers Impeding Their Pathways to Pursue Higher Education", has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Fred S. Klipsch Educators College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.



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### Dedication

I dedicate this capstone to my mother, Kathleen Ann (Kinkel) Neff, who is the center of everything, whose love and support has never known bounds. She has walked this journey with me, and this accomplishment is as much hers as it is mine.

I also dedicate this capstone to the women – the mothers - with incarceration experience or justice involvement, whom I've had the privilege to know, who have touched my life over the years.

To Anastazia, this is dedicated to you - you are the inspiration behind the work and everything I do.

### Acknowledgement

I acknowledge my dad, David Neff, who has loved unconditionally; and my partner, April Priest, who has sacrificed a great deal for my continued education.

I acknowledge my circle of friends – my chosen family – who have been strong supporters of all I do, particularly Leslie, Jada, Tina, Max, Jill, Pam, Angela, Damien, Abe, Sam and Stacy.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	3
DEDICATION	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
CHAPTERS	8 - 115
I.    INTRODUCTION & STUDY DESCRIPTION	8 - 21
a.    SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY	11 - 14
b.    PRE-DIAGNOSTIC WORK	15 - 21
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW	22 - 60
III.  METHODOLOGY	61 - 69
IV.   INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT	70 - 78
V.    INTERVENTION EVALUATION & FINDINGS	79 - 113
VI.   SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & DISCUSSION	114 - 120
VII.  FUTURE RESEARCH & CONTINUING THE WORK	121 - 125
VIII. CAPSTONE SUMMARY	126 - 127
REFERENCES	128 - 133
APPENDICES	

## INTRODUCTION

We hold mothers in high regard in this country, if they meet traditional expectations of society, yet we are incarcerating them at startling rates, then setting them up for failure upon release. Our society holds mothers to a higher standard – formerly incarcerated mothers even higher, and our communities and institutions can often place a burden on them. Not only are they stigmatized because of their criminal histories, they are ostracized because they are “bad mothers,” as Mitchell & Davis point out in their study – these mothers are viewed as “outcasts...and dismissed [by society] as throwaway moms” (2019, p. 423). There is minimal research on formerly incarcerated mothers, especially if it concerns advancing themselves, their college education or careers.

This population may be overlooked in our society. Despite my involvement in education programs at the Indiana Women’s Prison and having mothers as students during and post-incarceration, I had no initial interest in the mothers specifically and no intention of focusing on them until I listened to their narratives; my mind and heart were opened to the stigma and labels that follow them – not only because of their criminal histories but also because they do not fit our society’s definition of motherhood - and experienced their stories through a unique lens.

“I was judged very harshly for that [for being an incarcerated mother]. I was judged as being a bad parent... it does not matter any of the values I taught my kids and how well they are doing – what matters is that I was locked up. Period. The black mark against me is permanent.” (Angela, personal communication, 2021). If mothers do not abandon their own desires for the child, they are selfish and shunned. K.B. shared (personal communication, 2021):

My son now living with me full time makes me whole again, but I also want more than just that. I am a mom. I love being a mom. But I am *more* than that. I love all the things...for me, I needed more than that, and I do not want that to be...*somehow*... that I

care less about my child; if anything, I feel like it is giving him more. He doesn't need to feel like the center of the universe all the time...yes, I put him first, but there are other things happening in the world, there are other people in the world – it is not always all about him...he needs to feel unconditionally loved...but see the importance of the needs of others and those around him... (K.B., personal communication, 2021)

Her next goal is to “continue education on her own, in her way” (K.B., personal communication, 2021) and is preparing to apply to law school.

This harsh judgment in the community extends to the courtroom. Many assume judges will go easier on moms, but the opposite is more accurate - women are not supposed to commit crimes, much less mothers, *how could a mom commit a crime and abandon her child?* (K.B., personal communication, 2021). Society says it is more acceptable for men to commit crime, so “women take a harder hit, and so when they come out, they also face a different kind of stigma, a different kind of expectation when it comes to parenting and are expected to put all the pieces back together – to put themselves back together ...when we weren't whole to begin with” (K.B., personal communication, 2021). A.H. agreed there is still a traditional, conventional way of thinking in her community when it comes to gender roles – “it's okay if the dad is locked up, but the mom?! It's like...*what?!?*” she stated in a long, drawn-out tone (A.H., personal communication, 2021). It is inconceivable to so many people.

The barrier and burden of being doubly ostracized for being a mom with a criminal history and the shame and guilt that may hinder these mothers from pursuing self-betterment through education should be in the forefront of institutions of higher education. Formerly incarcerated individuals face external obstacles, which hinder formerly incarcerated mothers quite differently, such as daycare, state supervision, student loan defaults, and job obtainment. These women also face unique internal barriers, upon re-entry, along their pathway to college, such as the effects of Post Traumatic Prison Disorder (PTPD). The external obstacles require

progress within our systems, while the internal barriers require progress within the mothers themselves and how they respond to stereotypes and stigma that is exacerbated by lack of knowledge and support facing countless challenges.

Through pre-diagnostic work and research, these internal barriers emerged to be particularly intriguing – how does fear of judgment, anxiety and low self-esteem prevent formerly incarcerated and justice involved mothers from a post-secondary education? How do external obstacles impact internal barriers, and how would the lessening of external obstacles lighten internal barriers? Which services and programs can be put in place to help these mothers find ways to make progress within themselves and build their own capacity to excel through the stigma? Why is post-secondary education so important, and why should our institutions and communities care?

As discouraging as the external obstacles that impede the path to higher education may be, such as an admissions process that requires revealing criminal history and an inability to navigate financial aid or establish safe housing, the stigma surrounding formerly incarcerated mothers is real and incapacitating as is their unique fears about returning to the classroom. Who is a “good” mom in the eyes of the community, and who is a “bad” mom? If labeled a bad mom, as formerly incarcerated women automatically are, being accepted back into her community and improving her own life and the lives of her children is, in large part, dependent on her earning a college degree, which is difficult to achieve.

The importance of a clear path to college runs deep for these mothers. It is only through education programs and institutions of higher education that these women can communicate with many support systems which originated inside the prison. For “educational purposes only” is the only exception by which they can communicate with a former professor or educational director

or leader during their incarceration – if they are applying to college after release. Without these networks in place, the mothers may be more challenged; they are seen as risks instead of gifts (Halkovic & Green, 2015). These women “would not have survived without the connections to the education people – college is so vitally important” (A.S., personal communication, 2022).

### **Significance to Community: Practical and Scholarly**

This country’s prison population is the largest in the world, and over 600,000 people re-enter from state and federal prisons annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Kirp, 2021). The National Conference of State Legislators (Boggs, 2019) and The Prison Policy Initiative (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022) report that approximately 2.3 million people are incarcerated across the United States, and over 95% will be released back to their communities (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022; Bell, 2020; Kirp, 2021). Most adults who are currently incarcerated will be released back into society, and only 4% of formerly incarcerated people have a college degree (Bumgardner et al, 2019; Couloute, 2018), the lowest it has been since WWII before segregation was outlawed in public schools and before the GI Bill (Couloute, 2018). Less than 10% of formerly incarcerated individuals, who earned their GED while in prison, continue to college (Berkeley Underground Scholars, “Our work”, 2020). These people will be members of our community. They will be our neighbors, and their children will go to school with your children.

There is little research on formerly incarcerated and justice involved mothers and how they adapt to college upon re-entry in a society in which mothers are leading the way to incarceration at alarmingly growing rates. Over the last 30 years, the number of women who are incarcerated in this country has grown 750% which is twice the rate of men (Equal Justice, 2020). In 2016, over 1.2 million women were incarcerated or on probation or parole; when released, they are often not prepared for re-entry, as so many services have been geared toward men (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration - SAMHSA, 2020). Women

also must face resurfacing challenges from pre-incarceration, and difficulty in school is listed as one (SAMHSA, 2020). Sixty percent of women who are incarcerated in state prisons have children under the age of 18 (Equal Justice, 2020). Many of these women are single mothers solely responsible for their children (Equal Justice, 2020). The Equal Justice Initiative article's focus is the toll on the children, which also seems to be the focus of our communities according to many sources and the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, but what about the mothers being released into our community at growing rates.

Education, employment and recidivism are all linked; according to the National Conference of State Legislators, prisoners who attend college have approximately a 10% higher chance of employment and better earnings (Bumgardner et al., 2019; Boggs, 2019) and a 21% return rate, meaning re-incarceration (Bumgardner et al., 2019). When recidivism is minimized by education programs – during and post incarceration – it can be up to an estimated \$365 million dollar savings to taxpayers (Bumgardner et al., 2019; Boggs, 2019). According to Kirp, “Building the prison-to-college pipeline is also a boon to the public. Taxpayers save a boatload - a year in prison costs more than a year at Harvard” (Kirp, 2021, para. 6).

Beyond cost savings, formerly incarcerated students bring gifts and benefits to universities and their surrounding communities (Halkovic & Green, 2015). The presence of formerly incarcerated students can bridge relationships between academia and underserved communities. According to Bumgardner, “Ending discrimination against formerly incarcerated people can also strengthen the university by increasing campus presence of people from underrepresented groups and admitting highly qualified and motivated students and employees who were previously barred” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 66). Formerly incarcerated students

can help academic institutions reach audiences and populations with whom it is often difficult for institutions of higher education to build trusting relationships (Halkovic & Green, 2015).

Halkovic & Green (2015) send the message that by embracing the gifts of formerly incarcerated students, institutions of higher education put themselves in a unique position to help them make the transition from prison to community. The evidence presented poses that students with backgrounds that include incarceration enhance the university environment, not pose a security threat to it. These students can help to reduce stigma on campus and teach others to embrace students who are different and find empathy in place of prejudice. They have a true desire to give back more to the institution and community, be more engaged in the community and understand how systems work through their lived experiences. An example is best understood through the words of a formerly incarcerated social worker quoted in an interview in Halkovic's study (2015, p. 772):

A lot of people who are formerly incarcerated go into the human service fields; they have a deep sense of this is not enough. So I am working as a case manager and helping people but that is not enough. I am a mentor for College Initiative [a CBO that supports students getting into and through college post prison] but that is not enough. I volunteer at that spot on the weekends but that is not enough. I am going for my CASAC but that is not enough. Because they feel that I owe this to myself, I owe it to my family, I have an understanding of what my role and position is in society, in community and local level, at my agency, in my family. I know what my role is as a man, a husband, a father, and as a son. They have a deeper understanding of that...men and women who are formerly incarcerated... are more than likely doing more than just being a student at that campus. (2015, p. 772)

### **Significance to Marian University**

Marian University has already recognized this student population and the importance of education; through a partnered program, women at the Indiana Women's Prison are earning Marian degrees while incarcerated (Cantrell, 2019). The organization's efforts in serving an underserved population aligns with the university's mission and Franciscan values, particularly

the Dignity of the Individual (2022). Marian University is a Catholic Franciscan institution who “welcomes all to join” and strives to “serve the world by providing an education that transforms hearts and minds of students through the integration of knowledge and faith” (2022). That is the central focus of this study – how to provide the support and services to a marginalized population of formerly incarcerated mothers, so that they may find the power within themselves to seek college self-efficacy.

The interventions in this study are rooted in the adaptive leadership framework and geared toward a workshop for formerly incarcerated mothers to welcome them to post-secondary education. However, an opportunity for future research may develop in the proposed intervention being adapted and expanded upon to appeal to other non-traditional populations at Marian University, such as adult students - in online, asynchronous programs - returning to college after many years, veteran students, and the students in our two-year colleges. This makes this study and intervention significant to the entire community. Formerly incarcerated mothers is only one non-traditional population returning to college who face significant stereotypes and barriers on their pathways to college; if we can find a way to serve this population and prepare them to face the challenges and stigmas, we should be able to better prepare many other non-traditional populations to return to the classroom and make progress. If successful, the Marian University Pre-College Workshop could become a series – each dedicated to a non-traditional student population making their way back to the classroom.

### PRE-DIAGNOSTIC WORK

Minimal literature addresses the stigma and the challenges surrounding formerly incarcerated mothers' pursuit of college, so direct communication with the women is imperative. From communicating with formerly incarcerated mothers over the last six years, volunteering and teaching at the Indiana Women's Prison, and interviewing justice involved and formerly incarcerated mothers for prior coursework, I was able to help fill in the gaps in the literature and more intimately address the unique, real-world obstacles formerly incarcerated mothers face because of not fitting the stereotypical image of a mother or of a college student.

There is a stigma surrounding mothers with criminal records. Societal stereotypes follow them to workplaces, soccer fields and classrooms, and the fear of re-entering society at any capacity may feel overwhelming for some women, not to mention the return to a college campus or classroom in which they have no understanding of how to navigate, from admissions to financial literacy to acceptance by professors and peers. The mothers revealed these challenges in personal narratives over the years and in more recent interviews last year for a qualitative research course and can be broken down into three unified themes:

#### **The Bad Mom Box**

One theme is well articulated by formerly incarcerated mom, K. B. who acknowledged that even mothers who do not have criminal histories face severe judgment in our society – the criminal history part brings an additional dynamic (personal communication, 2021). Based on decades of experience as a social worker and working with formerly incarcerated mothers, W. M. agreed and said mothers are judged more harshly than fathers, and society is quick to judge - “from housekeeping to breastfeeding...women just get hit from every direction” (W.M. personal communication, 2021). One of the incarcerated women at Indiana Women's Prison has presented

this argument over the last few years about sentencing, stating that “men are sentenced as men, and women are sentenced as mothers” (L. H., personal communication, 2019). The claim is that Court systems hold mothers to a higher standard, hence they receive harsher sentences than men (or fathers); society really struggles to forgive mothers and welcome them back into their communities, so they face significantly more discrimination, because they have “stepped outside the traditional gender expectation of law-abiding behavior” (L.H., personal communication, 2019; K.B., personal communication, 2021). It does not take much to be labeled a “bad mom”, as Mitchell and Davis explore in their study (2019). Formerly incarcerated mothers are automatically placed into the “bad mom box.”

When mothers do pursue education or a career, “every dream you have, every hope, every chance of achieving something for yourself has to be shoved to the backburner,” or there is guilt (K.B., personal communication, 2021). She said that society puts that guilt on mothers, and she does not think fathers have that same pressure or expectation and that “we hold moms to an impossible standard” (K.B., personal communication, 2021). She explained that “coming out of incarceration, there is always that pressure...I cannot dare miss a soccer game...even if I justify it in my own head, then I feel the guilt and the shame when I am around other people...” (K.B., personal communication, 2021). *Why is she just now showing up to soccer games? Where has she been?* She is automatically placed in the “bad mom box.”

If a mom does not have custody of a child/children, people automatically think negatively about the mother or that the mother must not care (K.B., personal communication, 2021). A. H. felt that same pressure; she was “thrown back into being a mom” (personal communication, 2021). Her daughter was 2 years old when A.H. began serving her sentence at the Indiana Women’s Prison. During re-entry, “I was building my entire life up from nothing, from

toothbrush to spatula in the kitchen” (A.H. personal communication, 2021), trying to finish school and maintain employment to pay for everything. There is still this mentality that kids are supposed to be with mom, and “my situation is way outside of that box” (A.H., personal communication, 2021) because her daughter still lives with her father full-time, which A.H. fully supports.

Another formerly incarcerated mom sums it up well: “social norms are not so normal” (Angela, personal communication, 2021). Angela feels like there is a specific role that is still expected of mothers; “Indianapolis seems behind the times on women and motherhood [and sees mothers] as still being at home, taking care of the home and kids” (personal communication, 2021).

### **Importance of Post-secondary Education**

The second theme is the importance of a college degree for justice involved people, especially mothers, and the message it sends to their children. Despite how crucial college is for this population, “mothers are villainized for wanting more” when they go back to school (K.B., personal communication, 2021), and in a sarcastic, gasping tone – “*mothers coming out of incarceration think they have a right to an education and career – how **dare** they*” (K.B., personal communication, 2021), followed by laughter. A. H. believes that mothers going to college and exploring their own paths sends a powerful message to their children and makes them better prepared for the world (personal communication, 2021). She believes the completion of her college degree sent a message to her daughter: “I did it. *You* need to do it. School is important – she got to witness that” (A.H., personal communication, 2021).

K.B. wanted to set an example for her son that “anything is possible, and no matter what, you can do anything,” and her education was one way of showing him (personal communication,

2021). K.B. was the first one in her family to go to college – she always wanted her education – “our pathways, our desires, our goals are taken as a rejection of theirs” (personal communication, 2021) ... she says about her family, but this applies to our society’s views on motherhood. Formerly incarcerated mothers in pursuit of personal achievement – whether education or otherwise – is seen as a rejection to traditional values and definitions of motherhood.

K.B. and Angela both have plans to continue their education past the bachelor level; Angela shared how her pursuit of higher education post incarceration impacted her daughters in a powerful way (personal communications, 2021). Her kids were not passionate about school originally, but “as I was hitting all these milestones [such as graduating summa cum laude], her kids became competitive with each other” over who got the best grades (Angela, personal communication, 2021). “It was a true turning point” (Angela, personal communication, 2021). It gave her daughters the drive to make sure their grades were good and motivated them to go on to college – “your kids mimic you and if they see education is important to you, it will be important to them ...[pause]...on some level” (Angela, personal communication, 2021). Mothers who achieve remarkable things, especially when the odds are against them, inspire their children to do the same (Angela, personal communication, 2021). Angela is starting graduate school in Fall 2023.

### **Stigmatization on Campus & Self Efficacy**

The third theme focuses on the stigmatization of the industry of higher education and whether the formerly incarcerated mothers’ belief in their capacity can overcome barriers rooted in prejudice and stereotypes. “Mothers lose their voice because they have a past...everything has to be perfect, and the slightest mistake or stray from the ‘norm’, everyone is quick to remind you, exclude you, talk about you, and you have to prove yourself at every turn” (K.B. personal

communication, 2021). A. H. said that “you can see the disgust on some people’s faces” (personal communication, 2021), and because of this, you are not allowed to slip up to the point of being afraid to even try. K. B. is familiar with the look; just arriving late to a soccer game - “other moms are looking at me sideways” (personal communication, 2021). Angela said (personal communication, 2021), “I was a machine. Everything about me had to be perfect.” These fears of judgment and not being accepted into their environments are examples of the paralysis formerly incarcerated mothers feel when seeking education. How will the cycle stop if mothers are not supported upon release, and that includes attacking the stigma attached to formerly incarcerated moms and encouraging them to continue their education (K.B., personal communication, 2021)?

The stigma is real, and attacking it is not so easy. W.M. taught a college course at an institution in Indiana called “Orange is the New Black” (personal communication, 2021). The students stereotyped all incarcerated people as bad, regardless of the crime, but W.M. was able to “draw out empathy,” *eventually*, for incarcerated women and mothers (personal communication, 2021). The more the students became educated on why women and mothers were being incarcerated, the more they softened, which supports the Binnall et al study on college students’ views changing the more they become involved in the lives of their formerly incarcerated peers (Binnall, Scott-Hayward, Petersen, & Gonzales, 2021).

Angela’s narrative about her return to the classroom is evidence to how far justice involved students may go to keep their criminal histories hidden, even after a peer relationship is developed. She was only able to thrive in her mother’s Florida community because no one knew about her past, and she worked hard to keep it that way (Angela, personal communication, 2021). Angela “pretended my past never existed...it made me feel deceitful and eliminated my ability to

fully connect with others”, but it kept her from being judged (personal communication, 2021). Her need to belong was real. She lived in secrecy. She was worried about going to the probation office and being seen by a classmate. Angela assumed a false persona in Florida because her fear of judgment and not being accepted was that strong. The risk was too great - she could not risk her classmates and professors finding out about her criminal history. (Angela, personal communication, 2021)

Angela said of her secrecy, “I protected and maintained it...it was like a job in and of itself” (personal communication, 2021). She longed for belonging. Angela shared a memory of a Florida classmate, who received a speeding ticket. Angela’s former classmate was upset about going to court over a speeding ticket and felt embarrassed - she looked at Angela, and said, “oh but *you* wouldn’t know anything about that” (personal communication, 2021) as in going to court and feeling the shame of breaking the law. This exchange impacted Angela so greatly that her memory all these years later is quite vivid down to the classmate’s clothing and body language - “the girl was wearing a white sleeveless polo golf shirt, khaki pants, flip flops and was sitting at her desk with her long brown hair pulled back with a headband and had her hand on her head, leaning her arm on the desk, stressed out” over this speeding ticket (personal communication, 2021). “I was no better than her” ... but Angela could never let her know that (personal communication, 2021). On the outside, she had to look perfect – had to look the part. Angela had succeeded in maintaining a perfect persona. (Angela, personal communication, 2021)

The double stigma attached to justice involved mothers and the barriers unearthed by a disparaging society became apparent in speaking with the mothers over the years. Their genuine expression of fear and anxiety that comes with being placed in “the Bad Mom Box” were

powerful moments that reinforce some of the arguments made in this study's literature and carry them to a new level. The stigma is so intense that women go to desperate lengths to be accepted.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Relevant literature emerged from conversations with local scholars who work with the justice involved and formerly incarcerated populations, formerly incarcerated scholars, online searches and exploring databases of scholarly journals and qualitative and mixed methods studies, as well as websites of other organizations and institutions who have dedicated themselves to advancing opportunities for formerly incarcerated people at institutions of higher of education. There is considerable research on the external obstacles people face upon re-entry alone, not to mention returning to the college classroom. Countless journals, articles and studies focus on transportation, housing, childcare, parenting education, family reunification, mental health counseling, and “banning the box”, and while these obstacles are important to understand and address because they contribute to emotional capacity, the core of this study turns to internal barriers of stigmatization, stereotypes and self-efficacy and the college specific external obstacles that impact them. There is minimal literature on the stigma attached distinctly to formerly incarcerated mothers, and this is an area on which a reasonable amount of progress may be made.

There is minimal literature on making college a realistic possibility for mothers specifically and what exactly makes this population so unique. Sources, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) *After incarceration: A Guide to helping women re-enter the community*, presents interesting information and statistics, but not much is said about women returning to college (2020). The focus on education is about mental health education and being a better parent – not the mothers bettering themselves through college. The “education” section of the guide to help women consists of a three-sentence paragraph about women taking parenting classes. SMHSA focuses on “the effect of maternal incarceration on the children” (2020, p. 20) more than the mothers themselves, the trauma of

incarceration and how that impacts self-efficacy and self-esteem to pursue college. Sherman points out many obstacles unique to women and mothers – “issues related to child custody, repairing broken relationships, assuming the parenting role, and providing family stability are often urgent, yet stressful experiences” (2017, pp. 15-16). While there is a focus on motherhood and what is distinct about a mother re-entering the community, again the focus is on parenting and child relationships, not the betterment of the mothers through their own educational pursuits. With some of the sources, it is what they do *not* address more than what is addressed.

### **Importance of Post-secondary Education**

“Higher education offers a transformative opportunity to improve life circumstances for millions of people with a history of involvement with the criminal justice system” (Ott & McTier, 2020, p. 297). Formerly incarcerated people often turn to education to help navigate the pitfalls of re-entry (Binnall, Scott-Hayward, Petersen & Gonzales, 2021), and “securing a college education for the formerly incarcerated can break intergenerational cycles of poverty and crime” (Kirp, 2021, para. 6). In one study, 357 women were interviewed from 11 states upon pre-release, and 95% said their biggest need was education, followed closely by employment and job readiness (Bell, 2020; Garcia & Ritter, 2012). Results from a qualitative study in 2009 suggested a positive relationship was found between a woman’s post-secondary degree and her ability to manage stress and emotional strain from incarceration and re-entry (Parker, 2009).

Enrolling in higher education post-release increases job opportunities and decreases the likelihood of reoffending. Of the 600,000 people incarcerated annually, 95% will return to their communities, but of those, three-fourths will return to prison; it is a revolving door (Kirp, 2021). “The best way to break this pattern is to give former inmates the chance to enroll in college as well as the financial and psychological support essential for success” (Kirp, 2021, para.

5). Statistics show that only one in six with an associate level degree and one in 20 with a bachelor level degree ever return to prison (2021).

College also has a positive impact on formerly incarcerated women's emotional capacity (Bumgardner, Byers, Campbell, Crawford, Jones, Fleming, Hauk, Hochstetler, Kelly, Kovats, Lipscomb, McCown, Oliver, Record, Pender, Schmid, Walls & Whitted, 2019). A formerly incarcerated scholar and co-author of *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* shared (Bumgardner et al, 2019, p. 77):

Education has changed my life. The work that I do. Not only did it give me confidence in myself and boost my esteem, which is something that lacks severely, especially in women who are incarcerated due to childhood trauma. Yeah, it gave me the tools to build myself up to believe in myself...I found meaning in my work, especially as a historian...speaking for women who have been subjugated or incarcerated in the past and don't have that voice...It's very powerful. And then also some of my work includes trying to break down some of the struggles and the barriers that you experience after you're released. And so that's very meaningful and just gives me a purpose and it keeps me on track, and it keeps me away from negative influences. It keeps me away from negative places and it puts me in a circle with all positive people who are goal oriented. And that made a huge, I mean, I cannot stress this enough. It made all the difference and it's no wonder that people go right back to prison. I have a huge support system now in the circle of people that I'm in now that I would not have had otherwise. And a lot of people don't have access to it is absolutely no wonder they go right back. (Bumgardner et al, 2019, p. 77)

There are benefits to higher education for the formerly incarcerated, from lessening the likelihood of recidivism to better financial opportunity (Binnall et al., 2021; Halkovic & Green, 2015). Education is key to these mothers finding employment (Couloute, 2018) to support their children. Couloute states that “formerly incarcerated people are often relegated to the lowest rungs of the educational ladder” (2018, para 1). Formerly incarcerated mothers are one rung below that. Without finding acceptance in their communities and dedicated space in institutions of higher education, these formerly incarcerated mothers have little chance of transforming societal stereotypes or themselves.

### **External Obstacles – College Specific**

It is essential to understand the external obstacles faced by formerly incarcerated people and how these obstacles uniquely impact formerly incarcerated and justice involved mothers' fears, insecurities and self-image which create distinct hurdles in pursuing the many steps needed to return to college. The study, *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* is authored by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in Indiana and addresses many of the external obstacles that incarcerated and post-incarcerated women face in Indiana when it comes to obtaining access to education, whether inside the facilities or upon release in their communities (Bumgardner et al., 2019). For the sake of this study, the focus will only be on the formerly incarcerated and re-entry obstacles related to college. Their study addresses lack of funding and affordability, accessibility, admissions set-backs, lack of educational programs and resources, the burden of parole and probation, and defaulted student loans. These obstacles are compounded by internal barriers, such as Post Traumatic Prison Disorder and the stigma of incarceration.

### ***College Admissions***

Many colleges and universities ask applicants to reveal disciplinary history and criminal history and cite campus safety concerns as their reasoning (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), despite limited data and research to prove a connection between campus safety and criminal justice history (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Ott & McTier, 2021). In fact, a considerable majority of campus crime is committed by those with no prior criminal record; we tend to not think about how race, gender, class or privilege may keep someone who broke the law from being arrested, charged and convicted (Halkovic & Green, 2015).

“Asking the question” on college applications started in 2006, making it part of the “Common Application” which asks for students’ criminal histories – have they ever been “adjudicated guilty or convicted of a misdemeanor, felony or other crime” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 10). Nearly 700 colleges use this “Common Application”, and while some decide to make answering that question optional (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), about two thirds of institutions request criminal history information, and a third of those deny admission based on the crime (Ott & McTier, 2020). Even though over 800 colleges and universities recently removed a question about criminal history from the Common Application in August of 2018, they still have the option to request information about involvement in the criminal justice system (Ott & McTier, 2020).

Schools who use their own application may choose to ask the criminal history question in a variety of ways. Questions about criminal history alienate applicants and limit schools’ applicant pools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Many applicants never complete the application process, as when they come to the criminal history question, they quit over the anxiety, shame and embarrassment of revealing a crime or conviction (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). It is estimated that institutions lose two-thirds of formerly incarcerated applicants just by asking the question (Binnall et al., 2021). The report also claims that “very few students who attend college report prior felony convictions on their admissions applications which is why there is limited data connecting this to crime on campus” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), but the report does not address *why*. It could be that applicants do not reveal this, or it could be that they just are not applying due to the overwhelming fear the question evokes. Couloute addresses these same concerns – that if applicants must reveal criminal history, they do not even complete the application process to avoid facing discrimination due to their

pasts (Couloute, 2018). Beyond the question on admissions applications, there is also the issue of occupational licensing barriers upon graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Couloute, 2018).

The admissions process, while a structural obstacle, “often exacerbates PTPD”, Post Traumatic Prison Disorder, an internal barrier faced by many formerly incarcerated people, especially women and mothers as their pathways to and from prison look quite different (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 81). One of the authors describes how devastating her admissions process was at a university in Indiana (2019). She spent many years trying to lay her past to rest and better herself through education programs while incarcerated but being forced to divulge her criminal history in a separate application process was humiliating. She had to relive a past she was trying to forget, a past as a “drug addict”, but that is not who she is today. She shares her emotions in *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 81):

I found it humiliating. I found it humiliating to expose my deepest, darkest secrets, things that I would love to bury in my past, to a bunch of strangers who I knew only wanted that information so that they could judge me based on what I had done—and what I had done in no way, shape or form reflected me as a person. It reflected me as a drug addict. I'm not the same person sober as I am on drugs, nothing even close to the same person. And so, I hated to introduce them to that person because that's not who's coming to this college whatsoever. (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 81)

It took months for her to be admitted. Admissions told her it was “for the safety of the campus” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 81).

Formerly incarcerated applicants face many hurdles in the college admissions process. Many applicants are denied admission due to felony records (Bumgardner et al., 2019). Not only do most colleges and universities in the State of Indiana require applicants to “check the box” if they have a criminal record, but they are required to write a detailed narrative of the events that

led to the charges, even including information about victims and losses (Bumgardner et al., 2019). Aside from a written narrative about the details of their crime and conviction, some institutions require applicants to complete additional interviews, produce multiple references and have had completed any state supervision requirements, such as probation or parole, before being considered for admission (Binnall et al., 2021). Checking the box and revealing details of criminal history “weaponize stigma upon the formerly incarcerated” (Bumgardner et al, 2019, p. 65).

### ***Financial Limitations & Technology***

*Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* (Bumgardner et al., 2019) addresses financial barriers faced by the women post-incarceration, such as daycare, housing and transportation, even food, clothing, hygiene and cell phones or other technology access needed for basic connections and survival. Financial limitations impact mothers’ re-entry (Sherman, 2017). While incarcerated, the women have little to no access to technology, and if there is any technology at all, it does not allow them to connect to the outside world. One of the women describes it like this (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 58):

Nobody, and I mean nobody, prepared me in any way for the technology that I would have to deal with coming out into the outside world. And I would have to say for me, personally, that's been one of the biggest barriers to overcome. I mean, how do I work the cell phone and the computer and all of these things that did not even exist before I went in? I joke about this all the time, but I swear to God, I'm so serious. It's like I'd been trapped on Gilligan's Island for eighteen and a half years, talking through a coconut, and now, “Here you go. Here's your cell phone and your smart phone and your Mac computer and all these great things and carry on.” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 58)

It is impossible to survive college without at least a basic level knowledge of technology. One of the authors and formerly incarcerated mothers said, “if you don't have that knowledge, you're handicapping somebody almost to the point of incapacitation... They cannot function not knowing how these things work and how the world works now. So, this is something that we

need to keep in mind above and beyond just barriers to higher education, just education and knowledge in general.” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 80).

Some of the women formerly incarcerated in Indiana who have enrolled in online programs went through a tremendous adjustment. While online classes may be more convenient, the learning curve is remarkable, from learning how to download Word and attaching a document to an e-mail to navigating an online platform that houses all the course content. One formerly incarcerated mother who is currently enrolled in online programs shared her experiences getting adjusted (L.H., personal communication, 2022):

I felt like I was starting over with every bit of computer knowledge. Everything I learned while incarcerated no longer applied because I was online. Didn't know how to use Wi-Fi and still don't understand the purpose of a hotspot. When I transitioned to online courses, I felt like Fred Flintstone in a George Jetson era...I got major grade deductions for submitting speeches without sound because I didn't think to check to see if it was on. I am still learning how to use functions 11 months later that could make my life much easier. I can only navigate through my classes the initial way I learned which is probably the most difficult way, and if I accidentally do something different or easier, I don't remember how I did it...I am still learning how to use my phone. The phones of the present are mini computers, and I get lost in them, too. (L.H., personal communication, 2022)

All this technology costs money. Financial strain is one of the most significant challenges to re-entry in Sherman's qualitative study's interviews with formerly incarcerated mothers (2017). Meeting basic needs such as housing and clothing costs money, and they often must pay legal fees. Due to their criminal histories, finding employment is difficult. One of the women described her struggle with the truth; she wanted to be truthful with potential employers, but when she was, they would no longer consider her for employment. She contemplated lying on the application, but she considered the consequences of that as well. Several of the women interviewed landed jobs they loved; then, they lost the jobs when their employer found out the

details of their crimes through background checks, even though they revealed their history in the interview and application processes.

### ***Parole & Probation***

Coming out of prison, recently released students are often on parole or probation which demands a great deal of time, travel and money – the fees can be a heavy lift without support, a degree or employment, and state supervision can go on for months, even years (Bumgardner et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many of the parole and probation officers are not supportive of education and often put additional barriers in place which make it difficult or even impossible to return to college post-incarceration (Bumgardner et al., 2019). Some universities may offer housing and job opportunities to formerly incarcerated students, which may require relocation out of state, and the parole or probation officer may block the relocation (Bumgardner et al., 2019). They can spend half the day waiting for an officer to be available for required meetings, go to random drug tests and required therapy. This interferes with employment and any hope to continue college. One of the women shared her lived experience (Bumgardner et al., 2019, pp. 63-64):

I was released from prison ... with 3 felonies, 2 publications, 1 statewide writing award, a 3.79 GPA, 54 total college credit hours earned, and \$32,235.52 in defaulted student loan debt (\$11,158.57 of which is solely interest). I was to immediately start serving a year-and-a-half on house arrest at \$70.00 a week plus \$25.00 per random drug test. I had no possessions (not even clothes), no license, no car, no job, and no money. But clearly, I had plenty of debt!... I bring up the license barrier because not only was it in fact a barrier of sorts that could ultimately keep me from going to school, or getting a job that would allow me to pay for school, but also because the fines and bureaucratic red tape associated with reinstating a license is . . . a prime example of systematic oppression of the poorer citizens of this country. In order to get my license reinstated after being suspended for non-proof of insurance 10 years prior, I had to first pay the fine of \$526. Next I had to have proof of insurance just to have a license, which cost me another \$50 per month! If my insurance were ever to lapse, my license would be automatically suspended again. After this step I had to pay \$35.00 to take a BMV required online driver's safety course. Finally, after a month of fulfilling requirements, I was eligible to go to the BMV and pay \$17.50 to take my written and driving exam I could only enroll in

two classes this semester, which is costing me \$2,268.00 out of pocket. Just to give you an idea of my current financial situation I am having to pay monthly \$435.00 for tuition, \$280.00 for house arrest, \$25-\$50 for drug tests, \$50.00 for car insurance even though I don't own a car, \$5.00 for student loan repayments, and \$50.00 just for basic needs, not to mention schoolbooks and clothes. That equals \$845.00, but I only make \$800 a month at my job! How is one who is poor enough to need federal student aid in the first place supposed to pay college tuition without financial aid or loan assistance? (Bumgardner et al., 2019, pp. 63-64)

There are so many perceived external barriers that plans to go to college are often abandoned no matter how important education is to the women.

Being under state supervision is even more challenging for mothers, increasing demands and even involving child welfare services (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). "Upholding the obligations they had to their children, as well as the criminal justice system, often presented a conflict for the women" (Sherman, 2017, p. 71). Mothers are often torn between caring for children and meeting the requirements of the state, so they do not reoffend. Many of the women interviewed in Sherman's study realized that if they put themselves first, their children would be better off in the long run. Probation fees and parole barriers have significant impact on re-entry success and not only keep them from college, but it also often keeps them from seeing their children, especially if they must cross state lines. Mothers often must negotiate the continuous conflict between work demands, childcare and state supervision requirements (Ferraro & Moe, 2003).

### ***Student Loan Defaults & Financial Aid***

While incarcerated, many default on student loans due to non-payment. *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* (Bumgardner et al., 2019) explores the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated women who were not able to return to college upon release due to defaulting on loans while incarcerated, often because they were arrested mid-semester. The report claims this is often the most cited reason for not continuing education upon release - defaulted loans. However, there is an

inexpensive procedure that can rehabilitate the loans, (Bumgardner et al., 2019) but the women are often unaware of this, and the paperwork is daunting. If someone on the outside is not doing the research and the legwork, it is next to impossible to accomplish from inside facilities.

Consolidation of loans is an option which can make the women eligible for repayment plans, Pell grants and forgiveness programs (Bumgardner, et al, 2019). Most are unaware of this, and even if there is awareness, this requires entering a new contract, which incarcerated people are not allowed to do. Many of the women try to work with agencies while inside to set up a plan on defaulted loans but are given the run-around. Without the outside support of family or friends, the women “were only able to use the mail system and just sent in circles” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 17). Some were able to suspend collection activity, but loan debt was considered due in full.

The barrier of defaults is even more significant upon release; they are unable to fund their education on the outside and often have their wages garnished and face damaged credit ratings (Bumgardner et al., 2019). One of the women explained that failing to get out of default while in prison “made enrolling when she got out seem impossible” (2019, p. 20). Years after her release, she is unable to afford the payment plan for her loans and said, “my dream to get my college education was continuously being pushed further and further away” (2019, p. 20). She goes on to explain how crucial a college education is for formerly incarcerated people, as they face many challenges to establish a career and advance their lives. (Bumgardner et al., 2019)

*The Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* recommends several solutions to the default loan problem, one of which involves the creation of a pilot program to get everyone in prison who has defaulted on loans out of default (Bumgardner et al., 2019). If the process was streamlined and incarcerated and

formerly incarcerated scholars were more knowledgeable on the process and options, college could become a more realistic possibility. There are also federal, state and institutional policies that prevent access to aid depending on the crime (Ott & McTier, 2020). Even those who manage to get admitted and produce the funding, they are limited on which campus activities they can participate, in which majors they can enroll and on campus employment opportunities (Ott & McTier, 2020; Halkovic & Greene, 2015).

### **Connecting External Obstacles to Internal Barriers & Stigmatization**

Ott & McTier refer to these obstacles regarding admission and financial aid as examples of structural stigmatization while how the formerly incarcerated are viewed by their peers is social stigmatization (2020). Self-stigmatization is how the formerly incarcerated feel about themselves, often because of structural and social stigmas. They are ashamed of their history and work hard to keep it concealed from their peers, faculty and administrators; they also avoid engaging with others with criminal histories to not call attention to their own (Ott & McTier, 2020). Women often allow the crimes they have committed to drive how they self-identify (Sherman, 2017). This can lead to further stigmatization and cause them to fall back into old behaviors. Securing employment, connecting to the community, focusing on strengths and gaining confidence can lead to successful reintegration.

External barriers and lack of knowledge on how to get out of default on loans, apply to college, establish financial aid, learn advanced technology and navigate the requirements of state supervision upon release contribute to anxiety and fear on how they may be perceived and judged – this holds them back in their own heads and distracts them from taking those first vital steps toward their goals. *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students*, by the Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women, focuses

on many external obstacles and their connections to internal barriers, such as stigmatization and PTPD (Bumgardner et al., 2019). Support networks are needed that begin working with women during incarceration who can then transition alongside them into re-entry “assuring support in securing basic needs, housing, employment and continued education are foundational for successful re-entry as well as a catalysis for continued higher education for formerly incarcerated people” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 82). This support is crucial in helping increase capacity to overcome the barrier created by the stigma of incarceration which locks formerly incarcerated people out of opportunities and basic sustenance” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 82).

### **Internal Barriers: Stereotypes & Stigma**

There are many articles about the external barriers with admissions, probation, financial aid, defaulted loans and countless others, but there is minimal literature on what may contribute to the internal barriers and the impact those internal barriers have on formerly incarcerated individuals, especially for women and mothers, who desire college. Societal stereotypes about justice involved people and the stigma attached to formerly incarcerated mothers can be devastating. Stereotypes and prejudices “locks incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people out of myriad opportunities and basic human rights, not least of which is education” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 5).

### **Challenges & Vulnerabilities Unique to Formerly Incarcerated Women & Mothers**

#### ***Women’s Pathways to Prison***

Women go into prison and come out of prison at a more significant disadvantage than men (Rose & Rose, 2014). Women are often impacted by the “war on drugs” which has resulted in a substantial rise in incarceration rates (Sherman, 2017, pp. 18-19; Heath, 2009, p. 1), as they are likely to use drugs to cope with a history of abuse or resort to “petty drug sales” to support

themselves (Cobbina, 2009, p. 9). These mothers have unique treatment needs because many grew up in violent homes with parents who abused substances, and they likely have a history of physical and sexual abuse, which takes a noteworthy toll that is underestimated, especially when it comes to the impact on re-entry (Bell, 2020; Sherman, 2017; Cobbina, 2009; Heath, 2009). Half to 95% of incarcerated women experience trauma or violence prior to incarceration (Heath, 2009).

Women were typically the sole caretakers of their children before incarceration and intend to return to the role upon re-entry (Sherman, 2017). Men often return to homes and family units their wives have maintained while they were incarcerated (Cobbina, 2009; Case et al., 2005), while women often do not have a home to which they can return and are faced with broken families and children, even legal and custody battles (Case et al., 2005). Men are likely to gain employment; women have a harder time finding a job that pays enough to support themselves and their children while re-establishing a home (Cobbina, 2009). Women also face feelings of hopelessness about re-entering society successfully. Cobbina claims that most mainstream research “overgeneralizes men’s experiences to women”, making women “invisible” in criminal justice, leaving the re-entry experiences of women largely “understudied and undertheorized” (Cobbina, 2009, p 3). Women’s pathways *to* prison have bearing on their pathway from prison to college (Cobbina, 2009).

### ***Women’s Unique Challenges to Re-entry & Education***

While there has been a significant increase in female incarceration, reintegration continues to focus on men (Case et al., 2005). There are barriers that are unique to women and how much more difficult it is for women than men trying to re-enter, from finding housing to gaining employment (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). Women’s pathways from prison back to the

community look different, and they lack resources. Women and mothers are unprepared to return to their communities post-incarceration, and their communities are unprepared to embrace them and all their special needs. Upon release, women communicate fear of discrimination in their communities and concern over scant support systems throughout the re-entry process.

Many of the formerly incarcerated women in Parker's study self-describe as felons and felt labeled by their communities (2009). It is a label they carry with them in all aspects of life; they must reveal their history on job applications, and there are many jobs and careers they can never consider because of their felonies. The women face stigma when trying to find housing as well (Parker, 2009). The word "felon" comes up when applying for an apartment or home loan. Many end up in halfway houses after release, which they describe as being worse than prison.

While some said they desired an education upon release and that the education they had helped them find value in themselves, some women said they did not think having an education would matter because "the word felon was so large that they believed education would never wipe the label away" (Parker, 2009, p. 58) – that the stigma attached to being a felon would make education useless and that they would not be able to get a job anyway. Some study participants even described education as "not helpful, useless, confusing, does not make a difference, survive without it, and not needed" (Parker, 2009, p. 58).

The most intriguing part of Parker's study design is that she splits the participants up into three groups based on education level at their time of release (Parker, 2009). Group 1 did not have a degree; Group 2 had an associate degree or close to it. Group 3 had a bachelor's degree or higher and spoke to the importance of education. All the Group 3 participants agreed to the importance of education - one said that "possession of earned college degrees was empowering, providing them with the ability to navigate incarceration and re-entry...and overcome adversity"

(Parker, 2009, p. 74). The women gave specific examples such as the ability to write a resume, create self-help packets and obtain the documents needed for various transactions in society. One of the participants shared her view on her education (Parker, 2009, p. 75): “The higher your education is the better you can analyze and see what's real from what's not real. I can analyze what someone says and determine if this is true. I noticed other women in prison who were not educated, they did not know their rights. I knew my rights, I was still a citizen.” Of all the needs of re-entry, women cite education as the highest at 79% (Garcia & Ritter, 2012).

While it is crucial for women to take part in education programs (Rose & Rose, 2014), they are at a disadvantage because most programs inside facilities are for men (Case et al., 2005). There is substantial research supporting education-reducing recidivism and increasing the likelihood of employment; however, education programs in prisons are limited and outdated for incarcerated women which poorly prepares women for college and employment upon release. This, coupled with the internal obstacles of low self-esteem, the stigma attached to their crime and incarceration, and trying to re-establish relationships with lost children makes women’s journeys much more challenging.

### ***Distinct Re-entry Challenges to Motherhood Post-Incarceration***

Women are more likely than men to be the primary care givers to their children, which bring a unique set of barriers; motherhood creates more obstacles upon re-entry (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). The demand to reunite with their children makes a mother’s re-entry more complex (Gobena, Hean, Heaslip & Studsrod, 2022), and reclaiming their role as mother is an additional stressor. There is an expectation that they take on the role of mother but are also held to state supervision requirements and the mothers’ needs and voices get lost along the way. And parenting is more difficult due to the toll incarceration has on the children and family unit.

Children will intentionally distance themselves emotionally from their mothers out of fear their mothers will return to prison; the children exhibit a broad variety of emotions and behaviors, such as anger or clinginess, even engaging in their own drug use and other criminal acts.

The formerly incarcerated mothers interviewed in Sherman's study revealed that "mothering after prison was far more difficult than they anticipated" (2017, pp. 17-18). The guilt these mothers feel can be crushing. Sherman mentions maternal distress (2017). This can be impacted by the view of negative parenting due to their criminal history and socioeconomic status. This distress can be caused by trauma, abuse, dysfunctional relationships with a partner, mental health, and guilt and concern over the well-being of their children (Sherman, 2017). Society and family's negative view on them contributes to a lowered self-esteem (Gobena et al., 2022). Many of the women are stigmatized by male partners and the fathers of their children, which they described as a "danger" to their re-entry (Gobena et al., 2022, p. 12); they feel disempowered and have been humiliated by many professionals who are to be providing the support they need (2022). They feel tremendous remorse over not being a part of their children's lives while incarcerated, even as far as to question their "right to parent" (Sherman, 2017, p. 83). The view on these mothers is so negative that they begin to become more vulnerable and view themselves as bad and unworthy.

The more vulnerabilities, the less successful formerly incarcerated mothers will be in re-entry (Sherman, 2017). Vulnerabilities and life experiences of these women often impact their criminal activity because many of them are young, poor, mothers and have little to no education and no employment, lacking job skills. These situational variables make it more difficult to return to their role of motherhood (Gobena et al., 2022). Five areas of comprehensive need identified for their re-entry success include (Sherman, 2017): childcare; health care (includes

mental health and counseling); housing and transportation; education, employment and on-the-job training, and social support. Studies show that childcare was the least provided program for these women. None of the programs studied sufficiently met the needs of the women post incarceration. There is a lack of programming to inspire and encourage formerly incarcerated mothers (Gobena et al, 2022), and the lack of resources and programs for women leave them unprepared for re-entry and puts them at risk (Case et al., 2005).

### ***Motherhood & Bad Moms: Social Stigma & Self-stigmatization***

They re-enter society with limited resources and are “labeled as deviant and unfit for their failure to satisfy conventional standards of mothering” (Mitchell & Davis, 2019, p. 423; Allen, Flaherty & Ely, 2010, p. 162). All their life experiences surrounding poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence and incarceration impacts how they view themselves as mothers (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). A mother who deviates from what society views as normal or acceptable for motherhood is deemed unfit or bad (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). There is this idea that “good mothers should invest infinite time, money and emotional labor in raising their children” (2019, p. 422). Our society devalues formerly incarcerated mothers, expecting unnatural sacrifices. Formerly incarcerated mothers are viewed as “maternal outcasts” in their communities (Mitchell & Davis, 2019, p. 423; Allen et al., 2010, p. 162). Allen et al explains that simply being unmarried, uneducated, poor and lacking support and resources creates significant barriers for these women – they are invisible in their communities (2010, p. 162). These authors strive to understand “the impact of maternal incarceration on the experience of motherhood through the eyes of the mothers” (2010, pp. 160-161).

Allen et al says that “Deeply embedded in our cultural psyche is the notion of the idealized mother; typically middle class, married, educated, and with access to resources” (2010,

p. 162). Allen et al (2010, p. 162) quotes Ferraro and Moe (2003, p. 14) that “the ability to mother one’s children according to social expectations and personal desires depends ultimately on one’s access to the resources of time, money, health, and social support.” These women are marginalized by so many factors. “They are convicted criminals, viewed by society as social outcasts. Their multiple marginalities, combined with the stigma and shame of incarceration, renders this powerless population disposable in the eyes of society. They are dismissed as ‘throwaway moms’” (Allen et al., 2010). Criminal activity is more socially stigmatizing to women (Case et al., 2005) because it automatically puts them outside the role society has established for women and mothers (Allen et al., 2010, Ferraro & Moe, 2003):

Poor and marginalized women, such as the participants in our study, do not fit the idealized portrayal of motherhood. Consequently, they may be perceived as not only inadequate mothers but as inadequate women. They are also, by virtue of their poverty status and marginalization, the most likely to become involved in the criminal justice system and, therefore, more susceptible to having their maternal rights impinged upon. Within this long-established and widely accepted paradigm, motherhood becomes a privilege for certain women as opposed to a right for all women. (Allen et al., 2010, p. 162)

### **Double Deviant Theory & Discrimination**

Rose & Rose address the “double deviant” theory that when women break the law, they also violate gender expectations, so they are discriminated against inside facilities, having less programs and services available; they are also discriminated against in their communities when they try to reintegrate (2014). This is the argument made by Case, et al. Women with criminal histories, especially including incarceration, face stigma the minute they “step outside the traditional gender expectation of law-abiding” (Case et al., 2005, p. 154). One woman feels like “she is paying her debt over and over as she struggles to reintegrate while encountering barriers to success” (Case et al., 2005, p. 154) and urges programs to educate communities about the discrimination endured by formerly incarcerated women and mothers.

This “double deviant” theory applies to motherhood and the stigma attached to formerly incarcerated mothers (Case, 2005). Patriarchal societies believe women can only find physical and emotional fulfillment in motherhood (Gobena et al., 2022), and this view of motherhood is a way to socially control women (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Deviating from this recognized norm results in stigmatization and being labeled a “bad mother” (Gobena et al., 2022, p. 1); mothers are judged for prioritizing themselves or anything else that may take away from the obligations of motherhood (Gobena et al., 2022; Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Women who break from this ideological construct are targeted because they do not fit the standard. They face gender bias because they have not or do not sacrifice themselves completely for their children.

Adding a history of incarceration only intensifies this stigma. Incarceration “tarnished their identity as a ‘good mother’” (Gobena et al., 2022, p. 9). To help formerly incarcerated mothers, “it is necessary to move away from imposing the impossibility of patriarchal institutionalized motherhood and take a step toward a re-articulated mothering practice that understands mothers, mothering and motherhood beyond the expectations of what constitutes ‘good mothering’” (Gobena et al., 2022; Green, 2015). Women experience fear upon re-entry – “fear cuts across motherhood, employment and belonging in the community” (Parker, 2009, p. 48). Close to release, the women describe their anxiety and depression over the uncertainty they would face in their communities and a fear of not being accepted (2009). They felt lost without a sense of belonging and felt like they were “not a mom” according to the community in which they were entering (Parker, 2009, p. 67), which impacts how these women self-identify.

### **Post Traumatic Prison Disorder**

Post Traumatic Prison Disorder significantly contributes to a diminished capacity to face the harsh stereotypes and judgment the women fear when entering the public sphere much less

the college environment. A formerly incarcerated scholar in Indiana shares her lived experiences and the impact of Post Traumatic Prison Disorder (PTPD) in her co-authored report, *The Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* (Bumgardner et al., 2019). She explains that PTPD is distinct from other traumas because “at its core lies extreme and prolonged deprivation; chronic dehumanization; myriad forms of violence, often experienced daily; a chronic cycle of grief and loss” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 70), making it difficult to maintain education – that PTPD is “the most powerful but least understood barrier to high education, stability, productivity, and happiness” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 71) and refers to education as a “catalyst of transformation” (p. 73) when she was at her lowest point during incarceration coming in from a history of trauma. Incarcerated women have different pathways to prison than men, often layered with abuse and trauma, and prison life impacts women differently; “incarcerated women experience re-victimization/re-traumatization, as well as new forms of trauma through the carceral experience” which led to PTPD (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 81). PTPD is not widely recognized yet and is a unique type of trauma. While there is research and work done by professionals on trauma, the best population to speak to the impact of incarceration and the effects of PTPD on capacity and re-entry is formerly incarcerated women.

Formerly incarcerated women and mothers credit Shawanna Vaughn for devising the term Post Traumatic Prison Disorder (Bumgardner et al., 2019); Vaughn is a formerly incarcerated woman herself, who founded a non-profit, *Silent Cry* in Harlem, dedicated to providing care and services centered around PTPD (Nguyen, 2021). Vaughn says that “remnants of mass incarceration” ... “derail successful re-entry and rehabilitation” (Nguyen, 2021, para. 4). She authored the Post Traumatic Prison Disorder Act, Shawanna W76337 which has been

introduced to the New York State Senate. Vaughn says that PTPD is “the trauma [that] starts before prison and lingers forever until there is help” (Nguyen, 2021, para. 4). The Post Traumatic Prison Disorder Bill (Senate Bill 4872) calls for the following (2021, para. 8):

- (1) training prison personnel in basic trauma-informed mental health care,
- (2) policies for service provision to incarcerated individuals,
- (3) investments in behavioral healthcare services (e.g., screening, assessment and clinical interventions for trauma) and
- (4) connecting people with services post-release.

The status of the bill is *In Senate Committee* (New York State Senate, 2022). Vaughn manages to set PTPD aside as “separate and unique from other trauma disorders and is in need of a separate diagnostic category and separate forms of treatment” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 70). Prior to Vaughn’s advocacy for PTPD, prior literature seems to have lumped it under Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Just 10 years prior, there is no mention of PTPD in Heath’s 2009 study, but she addresses PTSD which encompassed about everything from the PTSD experienced in the 1970s by Vietnam vets to those who experienced domestic abuse (Heath, 2009). According to an update (Bill Track 50, 2022), this bill requiring mental health services to incarcerated people with PTPD upon reentry died on December 31, 2022.

### **Self-efficacy & Possible Selves**

The self-efficacy theory was first suggested in 1977 by a psychologist, Albert Bandura and applied to trauma – traumatic events and trauma recovery; trauma victims were found to have lower self-efficacy levels (Heath, 2009; Bandura, 1977). A great deal of additional research has been done on self-efficacy since 1977. Relationships were drawn between PTSD in veterans and lower levels of self-efficacy. The same relationship was found between PTSD and self-efficacy in survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Trauma negatively impacts self-efficacy. In the late 1990s, it was found that as self-efficacy – or internal sense of competency - increases, anxiety and PTSD decrease. Increased coping skills and enhancing a trauma survivor’s belief

that they can overcome the stress and trauma and regain control boosts their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Expanding self-efficacy is an intervention that could increase the emotional capacity of a trauma survivor and reduce the stress they feel in a given environment or circumstance. Self-efficacy work with trauma survivors is really about the survivor's perceived ability to cope with and manage a given stressor or anxiety in a given situation. An individual's inability to increase self-efficacy could result in being ineffective in various areas of life.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) does address low self-efficacy in formerly incarcerated women which can be caused by trauma, financial insecurity and the trauma of being incarcerated, but all that is offered by way of support is peer recovery counseling (2020). Bell's qualitative study focuses on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in the United States, specifically the State of Arizona and how to provide more support to this population at the university level to better prepare formerly incarcerated women for college (Bell, 2020). Bell examines Possible Selves, which is the theory that "a person's behavior is largely determined by what they think they will become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming" (2020, p. 7) and how this may affect decisions of formerly incarcerated women about attending college with the end goal of developing a "participant-informed intervention" and provide program recommendations to universities (Bell, 2020, p. i). Her intervention was the "College After Prison Program" (CAP). Her hope for CAP was to collaborate with formerly incarcerated women to provide needed information and support for students on the college process and the barriers as they have experienced them (2020). A focus of CAP was to increase the participants' self-efficacy, but Bell acknowledges that the lived experiences of the participants influenced the workshop and how it was received.

Bell's study explores how universities can better support formerly incarcerated women by clearing paths through bureaucratic barriers, creating "targeted" programming and outreach (2020). Bell also explores the women's fears of delving into their pasts to move forward and their "regret over their lost possible selves" (Bell, 2020, p. ii). Increasing a person's "college self-efficacy" as a motivating factor is at the core of Bell's study (Bell, 2020, p. 7). While the literature reveals numerous structural and social barriers unique to women and mothers, the most significant roadblock to pursuing college is their own struggle to believe in themselves and view themselves as "college material" (Bell, 2020, p. 7).

The women who participated in Bell's study shared their past experiences with education and their feelings of hating school and not belonging (2020). One participant shares her feelings on school at an early age (Bell, 2020, p. 65): "I hated school when I was in grade school and high school. I was not a popular kid and I just, I didn't like school. I didn't like learning. Didn't apply myself. And then in high school it was more about, you know, trying to fit in and doing like the in crowd did. I never really fit in." Not fitting in lead to viewing school as a waste of time and feeling self-conscious and insecure affected academic performance, which lead to believing in their inability to be good in school. (Bell, 2020)

Another participant said she "never developed a deep connection with the educational system and is still struggling to place herself in it" (Bell, 2020, p. 66). Many of the women who participated in this study shared similar stories of not belonging and stories of childhood traumas, from abuse and discrimination to losing a parent to incarceration (Bell, 2020). From teachers who criticized handwriting and overly strict, religious parents who cut all relationships with teachers and peers and home schooled, to falling in with the wrong crowd who encouraged "powerful negative emotions free reign" (Bell, 2020, p. 68), these participants' stories are

examples of how their pathways lead them away from school, many times to substance abuse, incarceration and the gradual decreasing of self-efficacy over time. If their college self-efficacy can increase, then the structural barriers do not seem so unrealistic or out of reach.

Bell's CAP Workshop begins with an *Education Journey Map* and a *Possible Selves Questionnaire*, allowing the women to face their past experiences with education, explore where they see themselves within the education system and discover options for future education and how institutions may support them along their journeys (2020). Self-efficacy, goal identification, financial literacy, and career pathways are strong themes threaded throughout the workshop's six modules. Bell immerses herself in the workshop activities with the women to build trust. (2020)

Images of formerly incarcerated students have of themselves, whether positive or negative, often control the decisions they make (Bell, 2020). Bell's intervention and CAP Workshop is rooted in Possible Selves theories. The possible future self is influenced by internal self-efficacy and limited by the perceived belief about what society thinks is feasible. The participants in Bell's study must understand and explore their past educational selves, their present educational selves and develop a plan for their future educational selves to navigate systems, overcome oppression and move past the stigma. If they can increase self-efficacy and envision a positive future self, it can motivate behavior, just as a "feared future self" can also motivate behavior and decision making (Bell, 2020, p. 30). If formerly incarcerated students – or any non-traditional students - can fully recognize the selves, they can visualize alternatives to behaviors that may lead to recidivism. To increase college self-efficacy, the self must focus on who they *want* to become and what they *want* to achieve as opposed to who they *think* they are and what they *think* they can achieve, or not achieve. Building self-efficacy can be done through the establishment of small goals and working toward progress on those goals; something as small

as working through the writing process on a paper demonstrates they can learn and are capable of college and makes them feel empowered.

Sherman (2017, p. 16) addresses the need for “an empowerment approach that identifies an individual’s capacity for change and making positive choices.” Sherman’s study addresses the theme of strengths identification (2017). The formerly incarcerated mothers in the study identified the importance of internal strength – what they found within themselves – and the external resources to combine for success. All the women interviewed identified inner strength as a contributing factor to their re-entry success. They identified all the positive attributes they had to contribute to society. These mothers have found a way to lay their past to rest and focus on who they are now, not who they were at the time of their crimes.

### **Stigmatization on College Campuses**

#### ***Fears of the Formerly Incarcerated***

*Taking Roll: College Students’ View of Their Formerly Incarcerated Classmates* addresses one specific obstacle that formerly incarcerated people face when pursuing a college degree: the stigma and trauma it can cause to formerly incarcerated people, especially at institutions of higher education (Binnall et al., 2021). Formerly incarcerated people “live with the mark of a criminal conviction, such attitudes—if present—can be internalized” (Binnall, et al, 2020, p. 2; Cooley, 1902), hindering their ability to fully reintegrate and transcend the ‘criminal’ label” (Binnall, et al, 2020). The Looking Glass Theory, first devised by sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, applies to the inner struggle faced by the formerly incarcerated (Nickerson, 2021). Cooley argued that people form their self-identity by imagining how they appear to others, how others may judge them and how those judgments impact how others feel about them (1902; Nickerson, 2021).

Justice involved individuals fear being mistreated. While teaching class last year at the Indiana Women's Prison, one of my students expressed this exact concern; she was preparing to be released in November 2021 and was thinking about finishing her degree online out of fear of how she may be treated on a college campus (L.H., personal communication, 2021). These fears reduce justice involved women's potential for academic achievement and motivation, possibly impacting graduation (Binnall, et al, 2021; Halkovic & Green, 2015).

The return to higher education can be traumatizing (Binnall, et al, 2021) for anyone with a criminal history, and there is little research on how college students feel about their justice involved peers. This uncertainty about how they will be perceived only increases the fears, insecurities and anxiety of formerly incarcerated and justice involved students.

***Peers, Faculty & College Administrators: Their Feelings on Justice Involved Students & Intergroup Contact Theory***

The Binnall et al study focuses on how non-justice involved students feel about sharing campus and classrooms with formerly incarcerated students and the power of prejudice (2021). They explore how the role of intergroup contact theory applies to a college campus and the immersion of formerly incarcerated students. The authors study a random sample of 185 college students, and the results showed that the more non-justice involved students are engaged with justice involved students – the more frequent, close contact with justice involved students - the more accepting they are and more likely to hold more positive views on the population. This research indicates that stigma correlates with lack of exposure to justice-involved classmates. But this stigma extends beyond their fellow peers and classmates.

Formerly incarcerated students' fears are legitimate: "campus stakeholders often harbor prejudices about students with an incarceration history" (Binnall et al., 2021; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Ott & McTier Jr., 2020). Binnall references other studies that assess the attitudes of

faculty, and the data shows they often hold more negative feelings toward formerly incarcerated students than other students (Binnall, et al, 2021; Copenhaver et al., 2007).

According to Ott & McTier, faculty attitudes and behaviors toward justice involved students have received little focus from researchers, and faculty members are “critical socializing agents” (2020, p. 298) who impact whether students can integrate into their college environments and stay through to graduation. Faculty are critical to student success, and when students perceive faculty attitudes to be negative, disrespectful or non-welcoming, it impacts their motivation and confidence level (Binnall et al., 2021). Often, administrators question - depending on the crime - whether formerly incarcerated people can be rehabilitated (Binnall, et al., 2021). The stigma attached to formerly incarcerated people can be paralyzing (Kirp, 2021, para. 11): “Formerly incarcerated students may well encounter a frosty reception on campus. College administrators and state officials may keep a close eye on them. Some institutions refuse to allow them to live on campus and bar them from participating in extracurricular activities.” (Kirp, 2021, para. 11)

Ott & McTier surveyed over 200 faculty members and found that their attitudes about students with a criminal history were more negative than their feelings about their other students (2020). Students with criminal histories encounter an uninviting campus environment and face discrimination from all directions – other students, professors, administrators and campus police (Ott & McTier, 2020; Dreger, 2017). Dreger provides a few examples from their study’s interviews with formerly incarcerated students. One of Dreger’s study participants said he was pulled aside by instructors and given a verbal warning that he would be “removed from the program if he decided “to revert” to old behaviors (2017, p. 192). Dreger’s participant said (2017): “I was given the little lecture about, ‘Well, if you do decide to you know, to revert . . .

we will be on you and we would escort you [out].’ You would be basically done” (p. 192).

Another participant in Dreger’s study shared his experience after he revealed his incarceration history (2017, p. 197): “They look at you differently afterwards. They’re like, ‘Oh wow, how long were you in?’ The next thing you know, you’re just . . . that guy. It just makes things awkward” (p. 197). Another participant added that “people look at you differently. I could care less what people think about me, but sometimes it’s just the . . . being uncomfortable that goes along with it” (2017, p. 197). Others shared how they were excluded from campus activities. As more are recognizing the value of education for this population, more scholars and researchers are focusing on the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in post-secondary environments.

College students stereotype students with criminal histories, citing a fear for the safety of themselves and their belongings and resent that justice involved students are privileged and special, getting free access to resources and education that they did not have and believe “incarcerated individuals were damaged, dangerous, aggressive, and ignorant” (Ott & McTier, 2020, p. 299). Such social stigmatization (2020) can diminish over time just with exposure and understanding. The more familiar one becomes with a person who committed a crime in their past, the more stereotypes get reduced about the justice involved (Binnall et al., 2021; Ott & McTier, 2020). Binnall et al references Gordon Allport’s “intergroup contact theory” which proposes that the more time a majority group spends with a stigmatized group, empathy will increase (Binnall et al., 2021; Allport, 1954).

Allport’s intergroup contact theory comes from his belief that prejudice is learned when a particular group is assigned objectionable qualities in society (1954). There is evidence to support intergroup contact theory regarding formerly incarcerated people – the more exposure to

this population, the more the majority group softens (Binnall et al., 2021). Quality of contact and amount and length of contact certainly play a role in level of stigmatization and feelings toward the stigmatized population – the more time spent, the more empathy is developed (Binnall et al., 2021).

### **Lived Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Students & The College Process**

One of the formerly incarcerated authors of the Lumina Report shares her experience returning to Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) while on house arrest (Bumgardner et al., 2019). She was called out of her tour group during new student orientation and sent to meet with the Dean; there was no reason for special attention – she had already revealed her criminal history and was accepted to the university. By the time she was able to rejoin the group, she missed a lot of valuable information and was not able to connect with the other students, who got to know one another while she was pulled out to visit the Dean. She shared, “I would like to work with my fellow students on collaborative projects. But I'm, I'm too embarrassed to disclose to them that I am on house arrest. So, it's constantly in my mind, ‘make sure nobody sees your ankle monitor, make sure that you don't talk about the fact that you were incarcerated’” (Bumgardner, et al, 2019, p. 76). This student thought being accepted to the university would be the primary hurdle, but administrators singled her out and subjected her to continued scrutiny. Her experiences on campus became a constant reminder of her past, her felonies and her differences from her peers; when she rejoined her tour group, she immediately knew “this was going to be a different experience for me than it is for the average college student. And that was really heartbreaking, because I'm much more than just my felonies.” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 77)

One of the participants in the Halkovic study explained how they felt when walking into a college classroom (2015, p. 769):

I think that entering a classroom as a person who is formerly incarcerated, you automatically feel different. You feel that you're different than everybody else and you do wonder about the other students where they're at and if they can actually tell that you are formerly incarcerated. It's like you wear it like an invisible coat—you feel it and you wonder if anyone else can see it and tell. (Halkovic & Green, 2015, p. 769)

It is common for formerly incarcerated students to refer to their identity as clothing (Halkovic, 2015). Articles of clothing can be put on and taken off, as they put on and take off different identities to fit into different spaces and stay safe. This is unfair to the students but also unfair to the academic institution – when formerly incarcerated students feel pressure to hide important parts of their lives, their peers and faculty miss the opportunity to learn and grow from their lived experiences and perspectives on life and community issues.

### ***Coping with the Stigma***

There is research that suggests that society maintains negative views on individuals who have spent time in jail or prison, and formerly incarcerated students go to a variety of lengths to cope with fear of judgment and manage the stereotypes they may face because of their criminal histories (Binnall et al., 2019). Students are torn between concealing or disclosing their criminal histories, knowing that judgment and stigma come with disclosure, but also that honesty can form the basis of trusting relationships and networks (Halkovic & Green, 2015). Some may choose to bravely disclose the details of their history, while others do whatever it takes to bury it and blend in with their peers (Binnall et al., 2019). Others cope by not recognizing or acknowledging the difference between those with a criminal history and those without. The desire to be part of the “in-group” and not discriminated against as a member of the “outgroup” causes them to deemphasize the difference “between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Binnall et al., 2019, p. 5).

### ***University Barriers & The Role of the Institution***

Few dispute the benefits of pursuing higher education, but the reality of formerly incarcerated women achieving this is more complicated. Universities present barriers, some of which they may not be aware, that scare away formerly incarcerated students before they have a chance to enter the classroom (Bumgardner et al., 2019). They have little access to support before they even begin the application and enrollment process – they have little connection to college campuses and feelings of “familiarity and a sense of belonging” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 65). When formerly incarcerated students do enroll, they struggle to get guidance from academic advisors and often cannot transfer credits from college courses taken while incarcerated (Bumgardner et al., 2019). They are limited in access to peer mentors and university resources. When universities lack dedication to connecting with formerly incarcerated students, “pathways to re-enter education can be poorly designated or lacking” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 65).

The reputations of universities and colleges can intimidate formerly incarcerated students who may have an away response based on “public images of whom the university serves, who is on the faculty, when and how it shows up in the community, and who enrolls on campus” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 65). Many universities are ill equipped to recruit, service and support formerly incarcerated students. It may just be a lack of understanding and knowledge. Formerly incarcerated students are simply not on the radar.

### **Recommendations from Formerly Incarcerated Women**

The study *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* offers recommendations from formerly incarcerated women based on their own lived experiences. The authors examine the impact of incarceration on

educational prospects and outline what would help this population build the capacity to face the stigma of incarceration offering wrap-around re-entry services and support networks (Bumgardner et al., 2019). These are significant adaptive challenges that the recommendations can only help to make progress, not offer fixes or solutions to change people or systems.

The women recommend hiring faculty, staff and leadership roles who have a justice involved background to help increase the comfort level of the formerly incarcerated population (Bumgardner et al., 2019). This would help universities commit to a true culture shift to make college more assessable to the post-incarcerated populations. This would require the university's "commitment to embrace justice-involved people at all levels" (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 83). The authors encourage colleges and universities to create a "reverse pipeline from the most impacted communities to campus" (p. 83) and to announce their commitment publicly to their communities, as well as expanding partnerships and networks to help with other external barriers that students face, such as housing, jobs and health care. One of their recommendations, which inspires my intervention, focuses on building designated, uncluttered pathways for the formerly incarcerated to enter campus and experience college, not just as students but also as workers, and inviting students to "design the pathways, with all information in one place, sequenced steps, and clear, individualized support" (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 83).

Bell's study explores how universities can better support formerly incarcerated women by clearing paths through bureaucratic barriers, creating targeted programming and outreach (Bell, 2020). Sharing alternative narratives across campus through scholarship, panels, and guest speakers, creating welcoming spaces for incarcerated students across campuses and being intentional publicly about the support of incarcerated students are all steps that can be taken to change the "dominant narrative" (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 84). They also recommend

providing college classes, educational programs and lecture series inside prisons, as well as other ideas involving incarcerated populations that may lay better groundwork for pathways to college upon release (Bumgardner et al., 2019).

### **College Programs Dedicated to Justice Involved Students**

Ott & McTier (2020) recommend the development of programs on campuses to allow campus students and stakeholders to engage with formerly incarcerated students. This would inspire discussions about the unique contributions these students can bring to a college campus community (2020). San Francisco State and Rutgers are mentioned for building peer-to-peer support networks, mentoring programs and other support programs for college students with criminal records.

Programs at institutions and organizations in other areas of the country are doing wonderful work to create college opportunities and support structures for formerly incarcerated and justice involved people which can help shape our direction in Indiana.

#### *UC Berkeley's Underground Scholars*

The University of California Berkely is home to the Berkeley Underground Scholars. Their mission is to build a prison to college pipeline for incarcerated, post-incarcerated and “system impacted individuals” (“About”, 2020). Underground Scholars was founded by formerly incarcerated and system-impacted persons in 2013 and receive a great deal of support from UC-Berkeley and other campuses in the UC network. A California state senator helped the organization receive state funding. The Underground Scholars focus on recruitment, retention and advocacy and are housed on UC Berkeley’s campus. All these initiatives are equally important and crucial for incarcerated students’ success; however, I am particularly drawn to the retention arm which includes financial assistance, tutoring, advising, employment and ties to

community involvement (Berkeley Underground Scholars, “Our work”, 2020). A team of tutors and advisors work with the students toward academic success and assist in applying to graduate schools and law schools. Their financial aid advising is catered to the formerly incarcerated population, and they offer various programs focused on leadership training and opportunities.

In May 2020, the recruitment department launched a new, remote “Incarceration to College” program in juvenile facilities (Berkeley Underground Scholars, “Our work”, 2020). There is a transfer support program which helps formerly incarcerated community college students transfer to UC. Their ambassador program operates like a mentor program, so formerly incarcerated students have peer support, particularly in the community colleges. The Advocacy division of their work focuses on removing barriers to college and employment, as well as support for formerly incarcerated students who are on parole or probation. They advocate for policies to improve access to higher education and work to ensure campus is safe for formerly incarcerated students.

Danny Murillo’s educational path began in prison and continued with University of California, Berkeley’s Underground Scholars which he co-founded (Kirp, 2021). Murillo’s journey and vision is dedicated to inspiring formerly incarcerated people to pursue a college education. Kirp addresses the damage done by the removal of Pell and the opportunity created by its reinstatement, as well as the obstacles formerly incarcerated scholars face on their pathways to higher education, such as admissions policies and rejection by many college campuses (2021). Murillo authored *The Possibility Report*, in which he makes “a convincing economic and moral case for encouraging formerly incarcerated students to go to college” (Kirp, 2021, para. 3).

Murillo’s report serves as a “blueprint” for formerly incarcerated scholars who want to pursue college (Murillo, 2021). The report provides an overview of the condition of institutions

of higher education when it comes to educating and servicing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The report addresses barriers and opportunities faced by formerly incarcerated people pursuing higher education in California. The report provides recommendations to help college campuses and the state of California break down these barriers and establish more opportunities for formerly incarcerated students to improve their lives and the economic health of the state. While there are significant differences nation-wide between colleges and states, this report identifies universal challenges that transcend across state lines, such as parole and probation not prioritizing post-secondary education and state supervision requirements creating barriers to educational goals. Students “straddle two employment problems”: finding work and juggling work and school (Murillo, 2021, p. 14). Colleges need more targeted student support; advisors lack knowledge on career pathways for formerly incarcerated students, and there are limited and inconsistent services, leaving formerly incarcerated students as their only advocates. (Murillo, 2021)

Targeted student support includes help retrieving transcripts, advising, an understanding of financial aid, registering for classes, and assistance finding housing, mental health counseling and legal support while in school (Murillo, 2021). This targeted support is addressed in Bell’s study to fill in the education gap for the formerly incarcerated (Bell, 2020). Once on campus and enrolled in courses, students need “intrinsic support” (Murillo, 2021, p. 18). Formerly incarcerated students face so many obstacles that if they do not have the appropriate support, they will drop out. The students interviewed in *The Possibility Report* often lived in halfway houses with no work, no money and no transportation; they struggled back and forth between meeting parole or probation requirements while re-establishing relationships with their children. Even their ages returning to college induces fear and insecurity (Murillo, 2021, p. 18):

I was embarrassed by my age to be going back to school. I thought everyone would judge me. My school at the time didn't have a program for formerly incarcerated people. I bounced off the walls asking myself what I can do with my major. I have all these felonies and didn't know what I could do. I almost quit. (Murillo, 2021, p. 18)

Students said that peer-to-peer mentoring would do wonders, but so few of these programs exist. Not only does the peer support help navigate the external obstacles, but it helps to “overcome the cultural, psychological, and social barriers they encounter on a college and university campus” (Murillo, 2021, p. 20). One student shared that a “support network is important. It is helpful to see your brother walking in your direction and being able to say ‘hi’ to somebody with a shared experience. That camaraderie is important. Some could encourage me and say ‘no, you sit in the front of the class not the back...’” (Murillo, 2021, p. 20).

Support from faculty and administrators is equally important in helping formerly incarcerated students feel welcome on campus and combat the stigma (Murillo, 2021). Funding should go toward creating support service programs to serve this student population, including on-campus mental health services that address the traumatic experience that is incarceration, and an effort should be made to offer work-study opportunities. A formal onboarding program is also recommended and an “ally safe zone” training so that faculty and staff are better equipped to service formerly incarcerated student populations (Murillo, 2021). The creation of these support services at some universities is student driven and often not an institutional initiative.

### ***Project PROVE***

Case et al (2005) focus on one post-release program called Project PROVE (Post Release Opportunities for Vocational Education) which addresses the special needs of formerly incarcerated women as they re-enter society and continue their education. This study describes our society’s climate as being “increasing[ly] unsympathetic” to formerly incarcerated women’s needs (Case et al., 2005, p. 147). Project Prove provides services to women released from

Michigan state prisons and follows a “model of reintegration that offers greater effectiveness for life stabilization, quality of life and recidivism reduction” (2005, p. 149). While the program begins with the women inside the facility, it extends their program support and services upon re-entry, which most inside programs do not do. Aside from helping them to enroll in college or vocational schools, the program recognized other needs of post-incarcerated women, aiding with housing, relationships with family and children and substance abuse treatment. PROVE recognized the need to clear external barriers and increase efficacy to get the women on a path to education. Lack of housing and homelessness, gender discrimination, little support from the children’s fathers, meager job opportunities, struggles with addiction and substance abuse history all “have a depressing impact on an individual's motivation” (Case et al., 2005, p. 150). These women’s needs far exceed “simply getting into class” (2005, p. 150). Their biggest self-identified barrier was low self-esteem. Self-esteem, self-image and psychological obstacles intersect the external barriers and are just as important to address. (Case et al., 2005)

Educational goals were the primary reason the women chose PROVE, and many were dealing with defaulted loans (Case et al., 2005). PROVE provided educational support and financial assistance with book, lab fees, transcript requests, tutoring, grade monitoring, grant applications, and an understanding of how school administrations work, as well as non-educational support in the form of monthly meetings with peers, counseling, jobs, daycare, and housing. Distinct about PROVE, it “provides a ‘safe’ environment where women are working only with other women and where there is increased understanding of the challenges faced by women who have been incarcerated” (Case et al., 2005, p. 153).

The dedication demonstrated by these programs and their leaders is motivation to make progress on educational pathways for students with incarceration experience and justice

involvement. Some of their work informed my research questions and intervention to explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers in Indiana and what they perceive to be the most hindering obstacles on their journey to college and how fear, anxiety and self-esteem may be the most significant barriers to overcome.

## METHODOLOGY & DATA COLLECTION

The mothers at Indiana Women's Prison and the formerly incarcerated mothers and students were the inspiration. The following research questions motivated the development of the intervention and guided this study:

- What are the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers in their journey to pursue college?
- How do the formerly incarcerated mothers perceive external obstacles to hinder their capacity as they pursue post-secondary education?
- How do the formerly incarcerated mothers perceive the stereotypes about mothers with criminal histories and how does the stigma impede their capacity to return to post-secondary education?
- How can Pre-College Workshops help formerly incarcerated mothers build capacity within themselves to overcome the external barriers blocking their pathway to college?
- How can a Pre-College portfolio help this population better navigate their return to college and face the stigma?

### Definitions of Terms

- *Post-secondary education, College, Education* are all terms used interchangeably for any post K-12 education at a university or college, any institution of higher education.
- *Formerly Incarcerated Individual or People* refers to an individual or group of people who have served time in the carceral system.
- *Justice Involved Individual* is more humanizing language for individuals who have had interactions in the criminal justice system, as a defendant, at any level; a justice involved individual may or may not have incarceration experience.

- *Incarceration experience* refers to the lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.
- *Recidivism* refers to an individual's relapse into criminal behavior leading to further or re-involvement with the criminal justice system and/or re-incarceration.
- *Double Deviant Theory* applies when women break the law, they also violate gender expectations, hence doing two things wrong from society's perspective.
- *Post Traumatic Prison Disorder (PTPD)* is a unique trauma, distinct from other traumas, which is experienced because of incarceration.
- *Identity* is made up of all the memories, experiences, values, beliefs and relationships around which we view ourselves and create our sense of self – how we self-identify.
- *Possible Selves* is a theory that explores the past, present and future self to increase self-efficacy and the idea that our behaviors are determined by our belief in our ability to accomplish whatever it is we set out to accomplish.
- *Self-efficacy* is one's internal sense of competency - a trauma survivor's level of belief that they can overcome the stress of a trauma and regain control of their self-esteem; *Self-efficacy Theory* is a person's belief in their own capacity and confidence to take control of decisions and behaviors that produce a desired outcome or result.
- *Structural Stigma* includes any policies or procedures in place at an institutional or within a system that restrict an individual or group of individuals by limiting their opportunities.
- *Social Stigma* is discrimination against an individual or group of people based on a perceived idea about them that stimulates fear, anxiety and low self-esteem within the stigmatized group.

- *Self-Stigmatization* occurs when one internalizes the negative perceptions of others which leads to shame and low self-efficacy and can be perpetuated by continued structural and/or social stigmas.
- *Intergroup Contact Theory* says that the more time a majority group spends with a stigmatized group, the more the majority groups' anxiety will decrease, and their empathy will increase.

### **Conceptual Framework – Phenomenological Method**

This phenomenological study examined the stigma surrounding motherhood and how mothers' criminal history may have impeded their pathway to college through the lens of formerly incarcerated mothers. Through this research, the hope was to find out how formerly incarcerated mothers feel about motherhood and their criminal histories and any challenges it has created on their pathways to pursue post-secondary education and re-entry into their communities. The hope was to uncover what may contribute to their challenges and which services and pieces of support may have helped/will help them to make progress facing perceived stigma which has hindered and/or continues to hinder their movement. My theory has been that mothers face additional obstacles upon returning to their communities and pursuing college, which is, in part, due to society's traditional views on motherhood and the stigma attached to justice involved people, especially moms who enter a traditional institution of higher education, which is still very much an elite system.

The purpose of the phenomenological method is to make sense of human lived experiences. A phenomenological research method brings challenges because the researcher must remain objective in the descriptions and interpretations of the lived experiences of their participants (Wilson, 2015). Wilson references the original work of Edmund Husserl and Martin

Heidegger and discusses the comparison between phenomenology as philosophy v. phenomenology as methodology. Eddles-Hirsch explains its root in philosophy can be problematic for researchers, creating uncertainty on how to “use phenomenology as a methodological framework” (2015, p. 251). The phenomenological researcher cares more about “the essence of the [lived] experience” (2015, p. 252) and what is at the heart, the core of those experiences - which is why the results section of the study is dependent on many direct quotes from the participant mothers; continuous recognition is given to the women’s advice on how to improve the workshops and portfolio, which embraces the phenomenological approach.

In this study, the phenomenon is how the formerly incarcerated mothers have experienced the stereotypes of motherhood and the double stigma of their incarceration and how they have experienced education with a criminal history and how that has impacted self-efficacy. To better understand the feelings and experiences of the mothers is to better understand the society in which we are all living. The focus was on the participant mothers and the world in which they live and share with all of us.

It becomes more complex because phenomenology is not one single approach, it is made up of three different philosophies (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The phenomenological process has three steps. Describing how the participants truly feel and experience the “phenomenon”, and, in this study, how they experienced the intervention is crucial and required the researcher to set aside preconceived notions of how they might think or feel. The first step - a process known as bracketing (or reduction process) - allows the researcher to set aside their own knowledge and beliefs to focus on the participants’ described experiences (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Imaginative variation then allows the researcher to identify themes and see a variety of perspectives. Finally, the researcher develops a statement that uncovers the “essence” of the formerly incarcerated

women's feelings and lived experiences - in this case, the core spirit of the mothers. The true essence can never be captured because it only represents the perspective of the researcher at any given moment through a specific lens of their study participants (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, Moustakas, 1994).

### **Researcher as Instrument & Anticipated Researcher Bias**

My personal interest in this topic began in 2016, when I started teaching English at the Indiana Women's Prison. Getting to know the women, many of whom were mothers, changed my perspective on justice involved women and opened my eyes to our society's views on women, motherhood and criminal behavior and incarceration. The more I worked with these women and mothers and after the pre-diagnostic interviews for a class in Fall 2021, I began to develop a new empathy for them and bias against those in our community who discriminate against this population – against those who disagree with the importance of college in prisons and creating pathways for formerly incarcerated women and mothers to complete college upon release. As a woman, I am aware of my biases against patriarchal society and biases in support of women as women, not women as mothers, and women's rights to career and education – that a woman's worth is not rooted in her decision to be or not to be a mother.

Working in higher education for 16 years, I acknowledge the importance of a degree, which could also lead to bias in a belief that education is the most important thing, and how making college more attainable to formerly incarcerated women will positively impact our communities. While I had little previous professional experience in qualitative research prior to this study, my involvement in the academic research and publishing program, in the Pre-College Program, at the prison has stimulated personal conversations, observations and research on these topics. My sympathies are entirely with the formerly incarcerated mothers which could have interfered with my interpretations of the literature, as well as my interpretations of their lived

experiences, and lead to bias. One of the participants has known me for several years which could have impacted her comfort level in the workshop series of the intervention more so than that of the other participants. To accommodate this, other Marian University staff and faculty assumed leadership roles in Workshop #1 of the intervention and contributed observations, interpretations and feedback.

### **Participant Selection**

All participants had the desire to return to college. Participants were chosen by two methods: a convenience sampling strategy was used due to time constraints. Convenience sampling does not require random sampling and allows for convenient selection of participants who are pleased to be a part of the research without the need to examine the full population (Qualtrics, 2022). Having worked and volunteered in education programs at Indiana Women's Prison in Indiana, I relied on my network with educators in prison programs, professionals at other local universities, and formerly incarcerated women in Indiana. To increase my participant pool beyond participants chosen by convenience sampling, I also used the Voluntary Response Sampling. Professional colleagues released a request for volunteer research participants on various social media sites and through various organizations and non-profits in Indiana to participate in this study, who were selected randomly based on interest and availability. See the flyer distributed as a Callout for Research Participants in Appendix G.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected in several ways: pre-intervention questionnaires, non-participant observations of Workshop #1 and her notes, participant notes and observations of Workshop #1, Workshop #2 group debrief of Workshop #1, and post-intervention individual interviews with the participants. All participants were asked to complete a questionnaire prior to Workshop #1 of the intervention. Three of the four participants completed and submitted a questionnaire, which

can be found in the Appendices. One potential participant completed and submitted a questionnaire but did not show up to Workshop #1; this data was not used. Data collected from the questionnaires helped to guide the contents of the intervention tool: the Pre-college Portfolio. Post Workshop #1, the group of participants engaged in Workshop #2, which was a debrief of Workshop #1 via Webex which was recorded for transcription. Then, participants were interviewed individually. All interviews with individual participants were semi-structured, conducted via Webex and recorded for transcription. Transcripts are included in the Appendices; some names are redacted for confidentiality. It could be perceived that I may have had influence over one of the participants who is currently enrolled as a student in Marian University's MAP Online Programs of which I serve as Director of Educational Services. She was not a student in my online classroom; however, I was involved in communications between her, her advisors, professors and other appropriate Marian University staff to provide educational services and support. None of the participants were incarcerated, but one was under supervision by the State of Indiana and received permission to participate in the study and intervention, including travel out of county to and from Workshop #1.

### **Data Collection Analysis Methods**

Workshop #1 was observed by a non-participant, staff volunteer who took notes on the day and shared those notes after Workshop #1. I also took notes throughout the day.

Workshop #2 debrief and one-on-one interviews were conducted via Webex and recorded. The Webex recordings were downloaded, saved and transcribed. For categorizing data, the study and data analysis was to be informed and guided by Johnny Saldana's (2021) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*; however, with only four participants in the study, coding was not necessary, as not as systematic – data gathering was rather small scale, therefore

manageable. Had there been fifteen participants as originally intended, I would have used Emotion Coding and Narrative Coding.

The selection of themes was also manageable and guided by Saldana (2021). Themes were chosen based on participants' lived experiences and theories from the literature review. Themes were also chosen that helped to answer the research questions (2021). According to Saldana (2021, p. 258), there is "no precise formula" on number of themes selected and can consist of behavior descriptions and content from participants' stories and lived experiences. Theme selection was based on the following considerations which are also addressed by Saldana – things to consider when choosing themes: repetition of ideas, theory related material, and missing data, which can be applied specific to barriers specific to single mothers (2021). The author says that "tensions in the data are excellent opportunities for constructing themes" (Saldana, 2021, p. 259). One example given was to answer questions like the following (2021, p. 259): *what worries or concerns are the participants expressing?* and *what do the participants find intriguing, surprising or disturbing?* Both questions helped me to generate themes and gain a deeper understanding of lived experiences, which is at the root of the research questions which "address what it is like to be, to have, or to live" (2021, p. 268). Themes were chosen in hopes of capturing the phenomenon being study – in this case, in this study, the phenomenon is how the formerly incarcerated mothers have experienced the stereotypes of motherhood and the double stigma of their incarceration and how they have experienced education with a criminal history and how that has impacted self-efficacy. The most significant challenge was organization due to the themes bleeding into one another and how connected the data is.

All participants were Indiana state residents. Consent forms for each stage of the intervention: Workshop #1, Workshop #2 debrief and individual interviews were provided to all

participants via e-mail with request for signature. All consent forms were signed and returned and are available in Appendices.

For confidentiality of the participants, they were asked their preference on how they are referenced in the research; the participants are referenced and quoted by first name.

### **Anticipated Limitations & Unexpected Limitations**

It was anticipated that my chosen population could limit me in several ways. Reaching out through social media channels, organizations and non-profits and asking for volunteers does not guarantee racial diversity. It was not as limiting as anticipated; the final participants included two white women and two black women.

There was also an anticipated concern that those who agreed to participate could later experience a conflict and not be able to participate at all and/or be unable to follow through with the Workshop #2 debrief and/or follow-up interviews. Several participants committed to Workshop #1 on Saturday, April 15, 2023, then had to decline due to a conflict, primarily due to conflicts with their children's sports and activities and/or childcare issues; they did not want to miss the first soccer game of the season, school competition, picture day, etc. This was a more significant limitation than expected. I was asking these mothers to make a choice - to choose themselves over their children, especially after losing so many years to incarceration. This proved to be an important data point.

The participants who committed and attended Workshop #1 remained throughout the other requirements of the study: Workshop #2 Debrief and the one-on-one interviews.

An unexpected limitation was how many potential participants and preliminary participants would be lost due to violating probation and returning to a supervised facility, whether a county jail or a housing facility.

## INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT

### **Intervention Introduction, Purpose & Proposal: Marian's Pre-college Workshop Series**

Interventions are a key component of the adaptive leadership framework. This intervention was a pre-college workshop at Marian University, designed to prepare formerly incarcerated mothers to return to college, so they may feel empowered to build the capacity needed to work within the stigma and push past the stereotypes instead of attempting to change the system or flee from it. The purpose of this intervention was to provide knowledge and services to help the participant mothers build capacity within themselves and establish relationships needed to develop a comfort level in a post-secondary environment.

This intervention was informed by pre-diagnostic work done for a doctorate course in Fall 2021 by interviewing formerly incarcerated mothers, as well as existing literature on barriers, programs and support services offered at other institutions of higher education across the nation. The design process, intervention itself and evaluation of the intervention relied on existing literature, communications with formerly incarcerated mothers through questionnaires and interviews, observations and communications with colleagues at Marian University, as well as professionals and staff working at other universities who offer services which support formerly incarcerated people pursuing post-secondary education.

### ***Intervention Design Overview***

#### *Participants*

The original goal was to have fifteen formerly incarcerated mothers in Indiana, with an interest in going/returning to college, participate in the pre-college workshop series which included two workshops, each approximately one month apart, and were preceded by a

questionnaire and followed by a one-on-one interview. This goal proved to be overly ambitious; I had four participants.

The plan was to choose five of the fifteen participants from an established network. Due to conflicts described previously under *Limitations*, three anticipated participants were lost due to probation violations; two anticipated participants never responded and were unable to be located or contacted; one anticipated participant was lost due to moving out of state; and one anticipated participant was lost due to illness.

The other ten anticipated participants were to be randomly selected from responses to a callout distributed through social media outreach and organizations and non-profits in Indiana, proved to be too high a number, and conflicts were underestimated. Several factors contributed to not attaining this number of participants, including the following cited by potential participants and contacts and colleagues who communicated with potential participants (2023):

- Work conflict – many single mothers work weekends
- Children with sports commitments on Saturdays (or other activities)
  - Faced with choosing between their self-development and being present for their children, especially after being absent from their lives during incarceration
- Lack of daycare
- Transportation/Travel
  - Too far to drive
- Commitment
  - Too long of a day
  - Too many additional requirements aside from Workshop #1

Despite my experiences teaching and volunteering in education programs with this population, I significantly underestimated how difficult it would be to get the women to come onto a college campus. While the reasons provided make sense, I am curious about what fears and anxieties may be running underneath these obstacles; there may be a lot more happening here in need of further exploration as far as alternative ways of connecting with these mothers.

The challenges that surround this population will always be there, so it may be that every workshop moving forward could be this small, even consist of multiple one-on-one workshops for those less comfortable in groups and virtual options. This may be the expectation moving forward – to create various unique ways for mothers with incarceration experience to enter the college environment.

*Questionnaires & The Intervention Tool: The Pre-College Portfolio*

A Pre-College portfolio was created and provided to the participants at the beginning of Workshop #1. The intent was to provide the portfolio in advance, but receipt of questionnaires delayed advanced distribution (see Appendix A: Questionnaire for Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Pre-Intervention Workshop #1: Intervention Tool - Pre-College Portfolio). An electronic version of the portfolio's resources, which also included video tutorials on online course navigation and virtual conference calling, was e-mailed to the participants, as well as university staff and faculty, on April 23, 2023.

The purpose of the portfolio was to provide a tool to help formerly incarcerated mothers navigate their return to college. Decisions about the contents of the portfolio were made based on existing literature, pre-diagnostic interviews and the results of the pre-Workshop #1 questionnaires given to the participants, as well as availability of Marian faculty, staff and other volunteers available to present on various topics. It was anticipated that the content would include but would not be limited to the following: application process, college program admissions requirements, career services, counseling services, computer skills and online services, financial literacy and financial aid and grant opportunities. After the questionnaire feedback was received and the availability of the volunteers was determined, the following content was finalized:

- *Portfolio Binder*: This was provided in Workshop #1 and included consent forms, agenda, participants bios, admissions information, online program application instructions; scholarship, financial aid and Pell information; default loans and forgiveness programs; personalized learning center resources, links and accommodations; online library services, career development toolkit packet, resume and cover letter samples and resources, and Marian University program options and student services departments
- *Electronic Portfolio*: These resources were provided via e-mail on April 23, 2023 and included an electronic version of binder contents, as well as some resources that could not be shared in the binder, such as a video tutorial on how to navigate an online learning platform for online education opportunities. The email included 10 attachments: finalized agenda, university contact sheet, admissions and financial aid PPT, financial aid and loan forgiveness info sheet, career development toolkit packet, application instructions, Marian University program options, Marian University student services, personalized learning center and accommodations PPT, and links to resources for virtual conferencing. The e-mail also contained two links to online video tutorials: one dedicated to navigating an online learning management platform, Canvas; the other dedicated to leading and participating in a virtual meeting/conference via Zoom or Webex.

The portfolio served as a reference tool with the intent to benefit the participants regardless of where they choose to continue and complete their college education. The portfolio was designed to be easily shared with others. The participants may choose to share the portfolio with their peers coming out of incarceration, so they may begin to prepare for their return to college. The goal was for the knowledge gained through the portfolio content to increase the capacity of formerly incarcerated mothers.

*Workshop #1 Content & Agenda*

This was a full day workshop, from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, April 15th, on Marian University's main campus, at 3200 Cold Spring Road, Indianapolis, IN 46222.

Participants were provided with breakfast, a catered lunch and compensated with a gas gift card and Marian University merchandise. Marian staff and faculty attended Workshop #1 as volunteers and lead sessions. They introduced themselves, their programs and/or their service areas and engaged in a Q&A with participants and other volunteers. Workshop #1 was intended to help the participants build capacity within themselves to overcome the barriers blocking their pathway to college with the hope that the participants would make progress enough to consider college despite the stigma.

The morning sessions of Workshop #1 addressed technical, college-related obstacles, such as how to complete an online application, apply for default loan forgiveness and how to apply for financial aid. Other sessions explored basic internet and technology skills and library services, which included basic Google searches, logging into and navigating a basic template in Canvas as a guest user, coverage of university library services and online databases, Webex and video conferencing capabilities. While acquiring technical skills and knowledge, the hope was that this would help make progress on the adaptive challenge – to increase self-esteem and build capacity to return to the college classroom, help the participants feel not so different from their peers and provide the confidence needed to overcome the stigma.

The afternoon session of Workshop #1 focused on relationship, trust and capacity building among the participants and faculty and staff. A Q&A panel and small group sessions were combined – due to time constraints – and offered an opportunity to connect on a deeper

level and identify similarities over differences, to address fears and build college self-efficacy among participants.

The following chart details the finalized agenda for Workshop #1. This changed based on the availability of faculty and staff and the needs and interests revealed by the participants in the pre-Workshop #1 questionnaires, as well as time constraints on the day of the workshop:

MORNING SESSION TOPICS	DETAILS
Breakfast, Webex set-up for one participant, Introductions & Portfolio Resource Overview	<p>Welcome to Marian at 8:30 with the Dean of the Klipsch Educator’s College and the Assistant Provost and Dean of Academic Affairs.</p> <p>Introductions of participants and faculty/staff volunteers presented an opportunity to share narratives and lived experiences.</p>
Admissions & Financial Aid presentations	<p>Associate Director of Graduate and Online Admission discussed the admissions process and impact of background checks, application process, how to apply online, transcripts requests, transfer credit, individual program requirements and contact information.</p> <p>Assistant Director of Financial Aid discussed financial aid, how to apply for aid, how to complete the FAFSA, advances in the process, how to navigate default loans, the Fresh Start program, waiver app fee and box elimination.</p>
Online research basics & library services overview	<p>Director of Library Services shared online library services, system navigation, keyword searches, peer-reviewed articles, YouTube video library, interlibrary loan, and public library access and services.</p>
Personalized Learning Center’s presentation	<p>Assistant Director shared the department’s services, medical documentation for disabilities, PTSD and pregnancy, documentation guidelines, locations for diagnosis, how to apply for accommodations – who qualifies and why, legal mandates and connection to Franciscan Values.</p>
Learning Management - Canvas and online platforms, sample course	<p>Director of Center for Teaching and Learning discussed Canvas’ capabilities and online platforms and presented a college course walk-through.</p>

	Due to time constraints, video tutorials on Canvas were provided to the participants via e-mail, as well as video tutorial on the navigation of virtual conferencing tools, Webex and Zoom.
<b>LUNCH TIME SESSION</b>	<b>DETAILS</b>
Over Lunch...  Career services, degree pathways, job outlook	Lunch catered from <i>Cholita Taqueria</i>  Lunch time guests presented on career services and local programs and resources for justice involved students. Marian alum from Recycle Force, in Indianapolis, Marion County, discussed the role of Recycle Force, job placement, job advancement, and their role in community.  Portfolio and electronic portfolio included a Career Development Toolkit out of the Exchange at Marian University, as well as resume and cover letter resources and samples.
<b>AFTERNOON SESSION TOPICS</b>	<b>DETAILS</b>
Debrief & Reflection: capacity, voice, vulnerability, boundaries, empathy, fears, language, word choice, and next steps  Q&A and group discussion session with participants and university staff and faculty	Researcher kicked off the session; a participant shared her narrative about her college experiences in Florida. Participants Q&A helped guide conversations.  Marian faculty or staff representatives were invited from several colleges and departments to discuss their programs, classroom spaces, views on justice involved individuals on campus, experiences teaching in a prison, etc.  The morning sessions inspired more discussion and questions than anticipated, so due to delayed lunch and afternoon time constraints, the Q&A Panel and the Small Group Session were combined.
Wrap-up & Next Steps  <i>How do we continue the work?</i>	Three of the participants, as well as several of the Marian faculty, want to continue the work beyond the research and capstone. A committee has formed to begin work in July 2023 with a focus on grants and the formation of a mentoring program for mothers with incarceration experience and justice involvement.

*Workshop #2: Debrief of Workshop #1*

Workshop #2 was conducted virtually and recorded via Webex on Saturday, April 29, 2023 and was a debrief on how the participants experienced Workshop #1; this included the researcher and all four participants. This provided participants an opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences - in a group setting - on what went well and what could have gone better, what should be kept, added or removed if this workshop were to be offered annually. Knowledge gained from Workshop #2 and follow-up individual interviews with participants helped to identify strengths and areas in need of enhancement for the next pre-college workshop series, as well as identify what changes may need to be made to the intervention tool. There was open discussion about the intervention tool, the Pre-college Portfolio, and how they experienced Workshop #1. The following questions were used to help guide discussions in Workshop #2:

- Please describe your experience in Workshop #1. What did you enjoy? What did you find challenging?
- What assumptions did you have going into Workshop #1? What was confirmed? What shocked you? What relieved you?
- What fears did you have going into Workshop #1? What fears have been lessened because of Workshop #1? As a result of the Pre-college Portfolio tool?
- How do you feel you showed up in Workshop #1? What about the faculty and staff – how did they show up and how did they make you feel?
- What did you notice about your own body language? What about the body language of the other participants? What about the faculty, staff and guest speakers?
- What about Workshop #1 would you recommend be kept for next time? Why?
- What about Workshop #1 would you recommend be eliminated for next time? Why?
- What do you think should be added to the Workshop and how do you think that addition would be helpful to students?
- Would you recommend the Pre-college Workshop Series to others? Why or why not?
- Have you referred to the portfolio since Workshop #1? Have you shared the portfolio with anyone, or do you intend to share it with anyone?
- Is the portfolio a tool that helped you overcome the stigmas you have faced?
- What do you view as the next step for colleges on how to help you?

*One-on-One Participant Interviews*

An anticipated concern was how comfortable the participants would feel about providing feedback in a virtual space with the group; therefore, each participant was also interviewed individually via Webex. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

**Summary of Intervention Steps & Timeline**

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Pre-Workshop #1 questionnaire to the participants about the intervention tool: the Pre-College Portfolio	After IRB approval January 2023 – April 2023
Workshop #1 on Marian University’s main campus	April 15, 2023
Workshop #2 Group Debrief via Webex	April 29, 2023
Follow-up – individual interviews of participants	May 9 <sup>th</sup> (Angela) May 12 <sup>th</sup> (Lisa) May 16 <sup>th</sup> (Zaynab) June 1 <sup>st</sup> (Ashton)

### INTERVENTION EVALUATION & FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to make sense of the formerly incarcerated mothers' lived experiences and uncover causes of the participants' challenges in returning to college. Another goal was to identify services and support that may be helpful for them to make progress on facing perceived stigma which may have hindered their movement and how they have experienced education with a criminal history and how that has impacted self-efficacy. The phenomenological researcher cares more about "the essence of the [lived] experience" (2015, p. 252), which is why the results section of the study is heavily dependent on many raw, direct quotes from the participant mothers in an attempt to recognize what is at the heart and core of those experiences, as opposed to relying on the researcher's interpretations. Continuous recognition is given to the women's advice on how to improve the workshops and portfolio, which embraces the phenomenological approach.

For the sake of this study, the focus was on external re-entry obstacles related to college, such as affordability, accessibility, admissions setbacks, the burden of parole and probation, defaulted student loans, and navigation of advanced technology. These external obstacles contribute to anxiety and distract formerly incarcerated mothers from taking those first vital steps toward college. While these obstacles are important to understand and address because they contribute to emotional capacity, the core of this study turns to the participants' internal barriers of stigmatization and self-efficacy.

How does fear of judgment, anxiety and low self-esteem deter formerly incarcerated and justice involved mothers from a post-secondary education? How do external obstacles impact internal barriers, and how would the lessening of external obstacles lighten internal barriers? Which services and programs can be put in place to help these mothers find ways to

make progress within themselves and build their own capacity to excel through the stigma and increase college self-efficacy?

Data was collected and analyzed from the group debrief and the individual participant interviews, as well as the detailed Workshop #1 observations of a non-participant and my notes from Workshop #1. This data permits an understanding of the mothers' lived experiences and helps determine if the intervention had an impact on their emotional capacity, college self-efficacy and self-esteem. The data may also suggest the likelihood of this intervention having an impact on others with incarceration experience and/or justice involvement on their paths to college. Analyzing and synthesizing the data, the interventions revealed the following themes and subthemes:

	<b>THEMES</b>	
<b>External Obstacles to College: Roles of the Institution</b>	<b>Internal Barriers to Freedom</b>	<b>Growth, Progress &amp; Adapting to Change</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SUBTHEMES</b>	<b>INTERNAL SUBTHEMES</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SUBTHEMES</b>
Faculty, Staff & the Administration	College Self-Efficacy & Self Esteem	Navigating College & Stigma: Portfolio Tool Feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Where are you in your journey?</i></li> <li>• <i>Conquering Triggers &amp; Overcoming Stigma</i></li> </ul>
Admissions	Building Capacity & Belonging	Experiencing the Workshop: Enhancements for the Future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Emotions &amp; Energy</i></li> <li>• <i>Employment Services &amp; Career Pathways</i></li> <li>• <i>Organization Design: Virtual Participation &amp; Length</i></li> <li>• <i>Technology Enhancements</i></li> <li>• <i>The "Against" Viewpoint</i></li> </ul>
Library & Technology	In F#@k It, there is Freedom!!	Future Research & Continuing the Work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Degree Options, Career Pathways &amp; Partnerships</i></li> <li>• <i>Mentoring Programs</i></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Financial Obstacles</i></li> <li>• <i>Committee Formation</i></li> <li>• <i>Social Media &amp; Advertising</i></li> </ul>
Career Services	Fear & Vulnerability	Capstone Summary

### **External Obstacles to College: Roles of the Institution**

Universities present obstacles, some of which they may not be aware, that scare away formerly incarcerated students before they have a chance to enter the classroom (Bumgardner et al., 2019). They have little access to support before they even begin the application and enrollment process – they have little connection to college campuses and lack feelings of “familiarity and a sense of belonging” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 65). A goal of this intervention was to offer knowledge, support and guidance along the mothers’ pathways to college. This intervention created a safe, welcoming space for the formerly incarcerated mother participants in Workshop #1 on April 15, 2023 to ask questions and share their stories and lived experiences surrounding their attempts to return to college. The morning sessions focused on external obstacles in hopes that knowledge and support would increase college self-efficacy and self-esteem and offer a sense of belonging.

### ***Faculty, Staff & the Administration***

At the April 15, 2023 Workshop #1, the university’s Assistant Provost & Dean of Academic Affairs welcomed the group and thanked everyone for coming. He shared the goal - to provide guidance in enrollment into higher education, learn more about obstacles, the experiences of the participants, and how to navigate through the participants’ journey for higher education. He said, “we will learn from you as much as you from us and that we realize many policies and procedures contribute to your obstacles – some are not things we can change...we want to see what we can all learn from each other”. (Julie, personal observation, 2023, Apr.15).

This set the stage and created a welcoming atmosphere immediately. This was the objective of the day – to learn, communicate, discuss and make progress where we can, such as looking into which colleges and programs at the university may still require a background check and if there is any way to remove it (personal communication, 2023, Apr. 15).

University faculty, staff and administrators are critical to student success, and when students perceive faculty attitudes to be negative, disrespectful or non-welcoming, it impacts their motivation and confidence level (Binnall et al., 2021). In the group debrief, participant, Lisa was “blown away by the response that we had...the way that everybody was working together from Marian to try to improve things... honestly didn't think that it would be such a great reception. So that I was absolutely just blown away with.” (personal communication, April 29, 2023). Angela echoed Lisa’s sentiment, “...it was nice to really hear faculty at a university be so supportive...the time that we spent after talking, you know, like... we really... like there was, there was a lot of energy with it.” (personal communication, April 29, 2023). Ashton also appreciated “how everyone came together...willing to hear the voices of, and the challenges that everyone faces” (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Ashton faced some personal life conflicts the morning of the workshop and joined via Webex and shared how that impacted her morning (personal communication, June 1, 2023):

They made me feel like I was there and a part of things, although I was on the other side of town, and at a service, and doing other things, so they just made me feel like I was a part of things, cause everybody does not work well under pressure. You know, nobody knew that I wouldn't be able to make it, even myself, so I think that the staff kind of handled my situation accordingly, and I, I really appreciated that. It made things happen so I could participate, and I even still received everything that everyone else received, besides like having lunch with you guys, like that was the only thing that was the difference. (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023)

In Angela’s individual interview, she spoke to the body language of the staff – that they

“had really good body language, like just very open body language...and as far as the faculty went was, was amazing” (personal communication, May 9, 2023). Lisa remembered back about body language the day of the workshop, and shared that “no matter how professional they are in their career, or in their place in that space, it was a casual, even-keeled type of thing. Like nobody came across better than anybody else. I don't think you know, like it seemed that everybody was open and receptive...” (personal communication, May 12, 2023). Lisa felt like the staff “showed up as one of us” (personal communication, April 29, 2023). Even though they may not have been able to relate, “they were actually listening, you know, so I felt the open mindedness, and the acceptance made me feel probably more human that I'd felt in other places besides my home in a long time” (Lisa, personal communication, April, 29 2023). According to Ott & McTier, faculty members are “critical socializing agents” (2020, p. 298) who impact whether students can integrate into their college environments and stay through to graduation. The support the participants felt from university faculty and administrators is crucial in helping formerly incarcerated students feel welcome on campus and combat the stigma (Murillo, 2021).

### *Admissions*

In the debrief, Zaynab spoke to her experience with admissions at other schools, how much damage it did to her capacity and how it impacted how she showed up at the beginning of Workshop #1 (personal communication, April 29, 2023):

...to be honest with myself, it was like for me, it was I, I went into [it] like a daze because when we got to talking about the admissions part, I got the, I start remembering my admissions when I went through the challenges that I was facing when I had previous involvement with the criminal justice system, and it was like I remember having to - after going through admissions and being enrolled in two to three weeks, I had to get dropped from my classes because of my background. So really through, like through that process it was like a lot of memories from my past just kept popping up, and it was just like... and it, and it kind of blocked me from trying to hear like the progress of what they're willing to do, the progress to, to kind of help the situation as far as moving forward, when I was still kind of dealing with my own trauma from my past. That still kind of hinders

me as far as moving forward to, you know, through the admissions part, to get myself enrolled because I keep thinking about my past a lot. And it's been something that's been hindering me for years. (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023)

Zaynab's description of feeling blocked by her trauma relates to Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory – trauma victims were found to have lower self-efficacy levels (Heath, 2009; Bandura, 1977) keeping them from moving forward. Expanding self-efficacy is an intervention that could increase the emotional capacity of a trauma survivor and reduce the stress they feel in a given environment or circumstance and increase one's perceived ability to cope with and manage a given stressor or anxiety.

Ashton offered a great recommendation related to the admissions process by describing assistance with the application process to ease anxiety and eliminate an obstacle – something universities can do and also something that may be added to the Workshop #1 experience moving forward (personal communication, June 1, 2023):

I really want to go back to school. I feel like we should have like an application process. Like, "Hey, are you interested in signing up for classes? If you are, you can start with these documents right here....you don't have to finish it today, but here's the starting process" because it might give somebody a boost. That might give them the push that they need. "Like, Okay, it's right here in my face, I might as well do it, and get it over with." Because I wanna go to school so bad, and I just keep jumping up every time I get on the computer... I jump up, I have something else to do, and like in the training you have, you have [somewhere] else to go. Like you're sitting there, so you, so you should be able to do it right now.

This is an excellent recommendation – to sit down and walk potential students through the online admissions process - and could be something arranged for students who make the decision to attend the university.

### ***Library Services & Technology***

It is impossible to survive college without at least a basic level knowledge of technology. The authors of *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly*

*incarcerated students* warns, “if you don't have that knowledge, you're handicapping somebody almost to the point of incapacitation... They cannot function not knowing how these things work and how the world works now...” (Bumgardner et al., 2019, p. 80).

Not knowing how things work can be an insurmountable obstacle, especially if just asking for help causes anxiety. Lisa shared that it felt good to know she was not alone in not knowing how to do certain things (personal communication, April 29, 2023):

...just to hear the stories, like to know that you don't have to be incarcerated for so long or, you know, be a recovering addict to not understand how to use a library, or to not know how to do, you know, certain things...to hear it from somebody in positions that everybody was in made me feel just a little bit better about having to ask questions; not so inadequate. And that was, um, just an example like the librarian looking things up, but there were many things.” (Lisa, personal communication, August 29, 2023)

Lisa asked the librarian about how to find specific sources online and how to determine which articles are peer reviewed (personal communication, April 15, 2023). While incarcerated – if in an education program – others do the research on behalf of the students, so when the students are released and pursue college post-incarceration “they get out and have no idea” (Lisa, personal communication, April 15, 2023). The librarian communicated that she would be open to recommendations on how to make the online library website easier to navigate – many strides have been made over the years, but they are open to consistent improvement (personal communication, April 15, 2023). They are organizing a student driven focus group to provide feedback to the university library to which Lisa will be invited to participate (e-mail communication, April 15, 2023). This was a great example of how we can make small, but significant progress.

### ***Career Services***

A representative from career services at the university was unable to attend the workshop but provided a career services toolkit to include in the portfolio. Lunch time guests presented on

career services and local programs and resources for justice involved students. A Marian alumna from Recycle Force, in Indianapolis, Marion County, discussed the role of Recycle Force, job placement, job advancement, and their role in the community. One participant was able to connect in hopes of launching a partnership between Recycle Force and her place of employment; however, the career services discussed on April 15, 2023 were focused on Marion County residents. As Lisa pointed out, options are extremely limited for anyone living in other Indiana counties (personal communication, May 12). Lisa referred to an employee in career services, her advisor and the financial aid representative as being her “life savers” (personal communication, May 12, 2023), but career services was noted as an area in need of enhanced representation in future workshops (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023):

I think resumes are very important, and it was touched on. Maybe even take time to do like a practice one or something...we didn't break up into little groups or whatever, but I think that if the next one that was, that there was timing available for that then, or even if not, we could do like a mock interview, maybe that way somebody could see how to answer the questions, and what kind of questions are going to be asked? Because even to this day, I have so much trouble trying to answer questions about the gap of employment. Other people come straight out and just tell them, like I worked for the State of Indiana. Well, to me, I feel like that's dishonest because I didn't work for the State of Indiana, I was forced to, you know, so how I, I just don't. I'm uncomfortable answering those types of questions still. (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

What Lisa mentions about working for the State of Indiana is in reference to jobs the mothers had during their incarceration, whether it was a clerk for one of the programs, a cook or working in the daycare in the baby dorm, they all had jobs. Explaining gaps in resumes due to incarceration is an area of discomfort, as well as identifying degree and career paths.

Lisa shared her struggles with finding a career path. She does not want to be a counselor or work with addictions and feels she has been shoved into that box, as if that is her only option because of her criminal history, “cause I'm gonna tell you it took me months to be okay with that

because I felt like I was not only failing me, I was failing other people, because I, I feel like this”

(Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023).

...I'm not gonna, I don't say, “singled out” in a negative manner, but I kind of was singled out in the fact that I'm kind of the only one that hasn't followed my path on helping people on a daily basis, you know, that have struggled with the same struggles that I've struggled? Like I like doing this, giving my testimony helping kind of I guess you would say behind the scenes, you know? I don't want to work with, like, addicts on a daily basis, or people in the justice system. I, I honestly thought I did until I came home and did it, so I feel like having different perspectives like that was probably more of a benefit that you didn't know was going to be a benefit, you know? I think that maybe that's something that you could shoot for the next time is not having everybody that on the same path, you know, cause like Angela has her path, and Zaynab has her path, and ones in the criminal justice ones in, you know, recovery and helping, and all that, and then here I am like “Hey, I'm working in a factory because I don't want to deal with those people.” You know like I'll help 'em from here, but it's just as much as I honestly thought it was my calling to do it every single day, I feel like I could probably be more harm to either them or myself, if that was me. Maybe I'll find a position, unlike the ones that I've tried, because the ones I've tried just haven't been for me, and so that might be something that could be pointed out was like just because you think that this is your path, and this is your passion, it doesn't have to be, and it's okay for it to change. (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

Finding more career pathways is an important next step for organizations to help women like Lisa who are not certain of their options and what may be a good fit. “I'm struggling a lot with career path because I don't know. I just don't know what I want to do.” (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023). According to Murillo (2021), this is a common challenge, and there is a direct connection between employment and college. Students “straddle two employment problems”: finding work and juggling work and school (Murillo, 2021, p. 14). Colleges need more targeted student support for degree selection and career options. Advisors lack knowledge on career pathways for formerly incarcerated students, and there are limited and inconsistent services, leaving formerly incarcerated students as their only advocates. (Murillo, 2021)

### **Internal Barriers to Freedom**

Zaynab loved the information on admissions, financial aid, etc., but especially appreciated the afternoon session on how “to help individuals transition mentally, physically, emotionally, and to give them the mental health that they need to keep moving after transitioning it into the world really” (personal communication, 2023). Zaynab shared that in the beginning of the workshop, she felt motivated by some of the university staff to return to school but is still dealing with trauma “and it's not so much of the facility or the event, or anything like that, it's just the traumas...having to deal with so many doors being closed, or the rejections, or not being able to sustain housing, or affordable jobs or, you know, just having things like that blocking me from moving forward” (personal communication, May 16, 2023). She wants to “learn how to really use my lived experiences for the next individuals that need help growing” (personal communication, May 16, 2023). These women’s needs far exceed “simply getting into class” (Case, 2005, p. 150). Their biggest self-identified barrier was low self-esteem. Self-esteem, self-image and psychological obstacles intersect the external obstacles and are just as important to address (Case et al., 2005). “Obstacles within ourselves are powerful” (Angela, personal communication, April 15, 2023).

### ***College Self-Efficacy & Self-Esteem***

While the literature reveals numerous structural and social barriers unique to women and mothers, the most significant roadblock to pursuing college is their own struggle to believe in themselves and view themselves as “college material” (Bell, 2020, p. 7). Lisa shared about her journey to campus the morning of April 15<sup>th</sup>. The drive alone was a barrier and created anxiety traveling to the workshop. She drove three hours, and it was the first time she had driven that

distance alone. She was encouraged by the fact that she was traveling to her school where she felt grounded. (personal communication, April 15, 2023)

Lisa shared her surprise about experiencing such an immediate breakthrough that Saturday (personal communication, May 12, 2023):

I knew that what the topic was going to be and that it would be received somewhat in a positive manner, but I also had assumed that there wouldn't really be a whole lot of breakthrough immediately, that it was more or less going to be [about] what can be done in the future and by "future," I'm used to years, you know, like within a couple of years this can happen... I didn't have any negative assumptions except for my nervousness, and I had assumed that at least one person would look at me like I felt - a weirdo, you know? What shocked me was the reception that we had, the understanding, and the wanting to understand. The wanting to know more and the compassion, it blew me away. I did not feel weird at all. I actually opened up more than what I thought I would be able to and the immediate response, and action that was taken by a lot of the Marian staff absolutely shocked me. So I was relieved that I could say how I felt...(Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

Compassion and empathy were in the forefront of the entire workshop but especially in the afternoon session, which seemed to be the participants' favorite part of the day. This is what may have impacted capacity and self-esteem the most. Zaynab spoke to the afternoon portion of the workshop in the group debrief and how she felt when we really engaged as a group and reflected on the day (personal communication, April 29, 2023). She shared that it was an amazing experience (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023):

"how everyone just came together, we kind of just, just even sat in the light, the, the dark for a little bit... turned the light off, and we all just kind of breathed for a second. You know, I think that should've been towards like the front just for everybody to [decompress], and I think, it was like towards the end ...when everyone really started speaking about the issue that we were there for in a way, and I felt like that should have been the main topic." (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023)

The afternoon session seemed to have special meaning to her because Zaynab addressed this again in her individual interview - how much she enjoyed that space to reflect and breath (personal communication, May 16, 2023). We "paused life, uh, and everybody just reflected...it

was like all my anxiety and everything that I had on my chest lifted like butterflies and just lifted me, and it was just like, *I love this*. This is where I, this is where I could really talk and be myself.” (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

Even though Ashton joined the session on Webex, she expressed similar feelings as Zaynab about the afternoon session: “one of my favorite parts of the event was towards like, the end...we all got to ...kind of relax, just take a breather, and just like really go into details of about everyone's kind of background, and to really understand why the support is there, and where the support come from?” (Ashton, personal communication, 2023)

### ***Building Capacity & Belonging***

“You are not the product of your circumstances. You are a composite of all the things you believe, and all the places you believe you can go. Your past does not define you. You can step out of your history, and create a new day for yourself”. – **Oprah**

The participants were welcomed to Workshop #1 with Oprah’s quote delivered by the Dean of the Educator’s College, then followed by introductions (personal communication, April 15, 2023). A common theme among the participants’ introductions was that they had a passion to give back, be a better person, to help people, to be included, to get to the top, and to get their education (Julie, personal observation, April 15, 2023).

Did the intervention – the workshop and portfolio tool - build capacity? According to the participants, it did. Lisa shared that she felt “like my feelings were validated in that workshop” (personal communication, May 12, 2023). On building capacity, Lisa explained what the workshop did for her (personal communication, May 12, 2023):

So some of the fears that were lessened was, I'm not gonna say I'm completely quote, unquote, “healed” from asking the questions, but like in my class right now, my capstone class, we have to do a recorded response, and I can't figure out the app, and instead of spending days on it trying to figure it out because I didn't want to feel inadequate or less than or weird or whatever, within an hour or so I already emailed the instructor and was like, listen, “Uh, can you give me some instructions where to find this at?” Because I

guess the workshop gave me a little bit more confidence, what on whether I know it, or not, the people that are teaching me, the people that are involved in this higher education program, care enough to understand to help. You know? They don't look at it as an excuse because that's... I guess, being an addict my whole life, I made excuses for everything, and so I'm very hesitant to say, "I don't understand this," or whatever because in my mind, it's an excuse, but nobody takes it as that, and that is a huge relief, and a fear that is way lessened. (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

Building capacity is often accomplished outside of one's comfort zone. Lisa spoke about everyone showing up in spaces with an agenda, and she elaborated on that here, as she spoke to her own agenda coming into the workshop and her own comfort levels (personal communication, May 12, 2023):

I guess, you know, when I talked about how like I had, I had my agenda, and I felt like everybody like had theirs, like in this tunnel vision type agenda, it was like me to help people in the future not go through the same things that I'm going through. The library was there to help...financial aid was there...but every single person like overstepped their own comfort zone, their own boundaries and, you know, had advice, or help, or offered something in every other department, and I walked away with way more than what I thought I would walk away with that would help me presently. You know? I felt like my agenda was there to help others in the future and that's... I, I really didn't know how... it would help me in today's, you know, in, in my life today, but it did way more than what I thought it would. (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

When asked about building capacity to face the stigma, Ashton shared that she felt welcome before entering the workshop space (personal communication, June 1, 2023):

...I automatically knew like this was for people that have backgrounds, and that will be accepted. When it's, when it was explained to me, I'm like, *Okay, so I'm assuming they accept backgrounds*, and once I got to looking at the flyer and stuff like that, the flyer was like, *Okay, bam! They absolutely take people with backgrounds, look at the flyer*. It was just like it was real. It was raw... so it didn't, it didn't scream to me, *You're going to be denied because certain decisions that you've made previously, they're not going to be held against you*. (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023)

Many women "were some type of victim and are filled with toxic trauma before they entered the justice system" (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023). There is self-blame associated with that. Based on Julie's observation notes (personal observation, Apr. 15, 2023), the participants were thankful for spaces to be when unsure about resolutions/answers and

thankful for the open conversation, thankful for everyone's time – they felt valued, “especially someone from the outside coming inside to help us” (Lisa, personal communication, April 15, 2023). “It gives us hope” (Angela, personal communication, April 15, 2023).

Angela shared how important safe, welcoming spaces are to this population (personal communication, May 9, 2023):

...having that space where people who feel like they don't belong feel accepted...I think that could be a very important space to build that belonging to bridge some of that internal struggle about not wanting to go, to make effort to go back to school or to, to apply, um, because you're scared. What are people going to think, you know, this and that? To be able to sit and feel like you belong in that, you know, like I mean, we even did that the circle and, and to feel like you're part; that could be powerful. (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023)

Feeling a sense of belonging is critical, and the afternoon session was about building capacity in an open space. Angela shared her story with the group that afternoon – how she worked so hard years ago to hide her incarceration history with fellow students and faculty when she was in college in Florida. Her mentality was “if I'm perfect, no one will ask questions, and I can blend” (Angela, personal communication, April 15, 2023). Since then, Angela is “expanding her wings” and wants to be in spaces where she can talk freely about her past – “you're going to accept me, or I don't want to be there” (personal communication, April 15, 2023). But it takes time and work to get there, and the participants were all in different places in their lives.

Zaynab shared that she still experiences “moments where I feel like I'm secluded from the group or I feel like someone is still thinking about my past, or might use my past against me, and then, sometimes, when I'm in these organizations and I'm sitting at the table, I ask myself like, *why am I here, or how did I get here?* Like, *Am I really accepted...* it's just the thoughts of just my past just constantly hindering me” (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023).

Angela wondered if Zaynab may have felt a little scared when she first walked in the

room on Saturday, April 15<sup>th</sup> or had some anxiety (personal communication, May 9, 2023); Ashton also noticed that some of the participants “appeared a little tense...but the people that were kind of tense got to tell their story, you know, and kind of got emotional, and then that body language changed, and they were comfortable because they felt like they weren't judged” (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023). Speaking to Zaynab’s perceived anxiety, Angela noted, “I think that she came out of that” (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023). Zaynab confirmed Angela’s observations (Zaynab. personal communication, May 16, 2023):

At the beginning of the event, I was nervous. I was nervous because I still had those thoughts of like, “Am I supposed to be here?” And that's all I kept thinking about...going back and forth with myself because I was sitting there like, “Zay smile. Like, Zay, speak, it’s okay”...but then it was like towards the end when I got to be around more individuals, and we actually spoke on the, like what we were there for, and everybody start, you know, introduce yourself where they come from. What they've done. It was like that moment it was like felt really welcomed. Oh my gosh, like I was opening up more, and it was like, “Zay, you should have been doing this from the beginning... You don't have those hindering you anymore. It’s okay to be where you at. It’s okay to speak...” (Zaynab. personal communication, May 16, 2023)

Angela was right; Zaynab came out of it. “From this short time together, I could feel a sense of community, and closeness with this group. Individuals were genuine, and heartfelt sharing.” (Julie, personal observation, April 15, 2023). The day began with Lisa’s introduction about her emotional three-hour drive to campus and ended with her goodbyes to the group. She thanked everyone and said she found this to be helpful. “Maybe I am further along that what I thought” (Lisa, personal communication, April 15, 2023).

### ***In F#%K IT, there is Freedom!!!***

“Progress was not for just me but for my kids, God, family, finances, school”. “Everything I do is for my children.” (Zaynab, personal communication, April, 15, 2023)

Single mothers are often primary care givers to their children, which brings a unique set of barriers; motherhood creates more obstacles upon re-entry (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). In some

pre-diagnostic work in October 2021, K.B. explained that “coming out of incarceration, there is always that pressure...I cannot dare miss a soccer game...even if I justify it in my own head, then I feel the guilt and the shame when I am around other people...” (personal communication, 2021). Mothers face gender bias because they have not or do not sacrifice themselves completely for their children. This issue presented itself in the research process pertaining to attendance at the all-day Saturday workshop. Several participants were faced with choosing themselves by attending an all-day Saturday workshop for college or attending their child’s soccer game or other sporting event or activity.

One of the participants shared the following regarding the conflicts faced by several potential participants who had to decline participation, when asked if conflicts with children limited available participants (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023):

And that, and that I know for a fact. I've had people tell me that they couldn't come that had planned on coming because of whatever... One had a basketball, was it basketball, soccer game; one had a soccer game. A friend of another friend of mine couldn't come because her son is in a, he's in a, like a treatment facility of some sort; A behavior health facility, and so like she had to Saturdays, is the only day she can visit. So a half day she could have done a half. She couldn't but, she, she either had to be there in the afternoon or in the morning. So...

I later found out that Zaynab missed her son’s soccer game that Workshop Saturday, April 15<sup>th</sup>. That is part of being a mom; it comes with tough choices. Zaynab explains that while she is sitting in events at various organizations (personal communication, April 29, 2023):

I think about the kids, and I think about all the efforts, and the, the contribution that I have to do, and sometimes I feel like I have to go harder because of my past. So sometimes it's like I'm having to do extra. I feel like I need to do extra or save more just to feel like I'm a part of it, and, and sometimes I have to kind of tell myself, like, you know, just breathe, step back, you know, it's okay. Like, “You deserve this.” (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023)

That was a core message – *you deserve this* - delivered by faculty in the afternoon session of the workshop. One of the university faculty members, who is a single mom, shared a quote

from her son, who is a college student (personal communication, April 15, 2023): “In, f#@k it, there is freedom!!!” Often held back by the anxiety of not fitting in or being judged or failing, he realized that he needed to release all those fears, or he would never make progress within himself. He needed to believe that he could do it and that he deserved it. This story impacted everyone in the room on Saturday, April 15<sup>th</sup>, and the women nodded, laughed and shouted out in enthusiastic agreement (personal observations, April 15, 2023).

Zaynab mentioned that she is trying to be there for her children and for others but not forget about herself and to remember the importance of self-care (personal communication, April 15, 2023).

Being a mother while re-entering society was hard due to not being able to provide for my children. Such as obtaining a good paying job to be able to afford housing and to access Higher Education. It impacted my return to college hard because I couldn’t get the credentials that I needed to access other things. (Zaynab, questionnaire personal communication, 2023).

When asked how her role as a mother impacted her re-entry and return to college, Lisa’s response looks a little different, as she is mother to four grown daughters (questionnaire response/personal communication, April, 2023):

Returning home was scary enough knowing that I had to find a place in my children’s lives because for the last 12 1/2 years, they developed a routine and a life and the only part I had in it was on the phone or monthly visits. I had to build relationships and get to know each and every one of them on a daily basis as they had to get to know me actually, I had to get to know myself in the free world because life is way different than it is in a secluded prison environment. (Lisa, questionnaire response/personal communication, April, 2023):

Mothers carry so many responsibilities – how realistic is it for them to be able to show up in-person in so many physical spaces? This creates even more barriers, and because of the depth of these challenges, this truly is an under-represented population, especially single mothers with younger children in the home – they face more challenges with daycare and activities than

mothers with grown children living on their own. Angela shared that it is easier for her to return to school – “my kids are grown” (personal communication, May 9, 2023). Unlike incarcerated fathers, many of these women are single mothers solely responsible for their children (Equal Justice, 2020). One of the faculty volunteers recommended offering daycare during the workshop and was curious if this would have attracted more participants. It is tough to say for certain – was it lack of daycare or children’s sports and activities.

When asked if this workshop and portfolio content was/is *specifically* helpful for formerly incarcerated mothers to gain some capacity and gain some knowledge to hopefully make some progress in a small way, or to gain some confidence in a small way, and overcome some of the stigma attached, Lisa shared (personal communication, May 12, 2023):

I don’t... There is some focus on mothers in it, um, but it's more for, I would say it, it ended up, and I don't even think it's so much as women as maybe post incarceration, but also underdeveloped type of people, people that have chosen the wrong path maybe that didn't get caught and go to prison, but want to change their life, can still use this because to be honest while I was in my addiction, I didn't spend time learning what was being taught, um, like technology wise or or anything like that. I was busy committing crimes... I'm going to use my daughter as an example. Um, she's been in and out of jail, but most of the things she knows how to do on the computer are illegal. You know?... So this binder and, and this type of workshop is important to people like that ... She doesn't have the incarceration to use as a reasoning, so by having something like this, it might help people in her situation, um, take that initial step to do something because then they don't have to feel that vulnerability, or the embarrassment of saying, excuse my language, “I'm just a screw up, you know, I don't, I don't know it because I'm, I'm a screw up.” But you don't know that cause you didn't see me in the paper. You know, um, it's easier to admit something when people already know... So even if it wasn't for mothers, I feel like, just like Saturday, how it turned out is supposed to be how it turned out, and I feel like it turned out the way that it was supposed to be turned out because what if it was just for mothers that were incarcerated? And say there's only ten of them that you know of right now, but there's fifty people that wanna go to school that are scared to admit their past, and all they have to do is, *Hey, here's check this out*, because I've talked to my daughter about it, you know? ...she's coming over next week and we're gonna go through some of that because I'm trying to get her to go to school. You know? So, something that you created actually for two of my daughters... So this binder... is going to help two of my kids, you know? (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

Lisa makes powerful points here. There is a significant population overcome by addiction and other challenges, who were just never caught and arrested, who may be able to benefit from this information, return to college and find new pathways that may never end up leading to incarceration

Zaynab - coming into the workshop – assumed there would be more focus and discussion of women with children and elaborated below (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

I have to say, going into it, I expected more of, more talk about the women with children. When we went there, I felt like it was more so of like an orientation to college, which is still okay because there was an introduction by education too with women with children, but I just, I wanted to hear more as far as what are we going to do for these individuals? What programs do we have involved? Who are we connected to? What do we need to do? You know, just, I guess kind of going from there. Being in this space, especially towards the end of the event really was amazing for me. We got to actually sit and kind of talk more. We got, we expressed like our views and our opinions, or kind of even our own stories from how we kind of relate or just support in the women with children in the situation as far as being incarcerated, and that part to me was the most beautiful moment of the whole event. (Zaynab, (personal communication, May 16, 2023)

This is strong feedback from Zaynab and stimulates new ideas for future workshops. As for programs and partnership, which is my interpretation of part of Zaynab’s feedback, that is outside the scope of this study but is part of desired future research and progress.

### ***Fear & Vulnerability***

Formerly incarcerated students’ fears are legitimate: “campus stakeholders often harbor prejudices about students with an incarceration history” (Binnall et al., 2021; Copenhaver et al., 2007; Ott & McTier Jr., 2020). Angela was “surprised by...how genuinely nice the staff was and how openly accepting they were” (personal communication, May 9, 2023). Her biggest fear was not knowing what would be expected of her in the workshop space, but the day flowed well; she realized her fears were unfounded. She further explained that her initial fears were “taken away

as the day went on and, and, and just feeling so welcomed, like it just, and like my voice mattered” (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023).

Zaynab’s expression of her fears goes back to those feelings of not belonging and not feeling deserving, as she shares how she experienced the beginning of the workshop (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

My fear going into the event was flashbacks of my own trauma of just having that guilt of “am I supposed to be here? Am I underqualified or you know to even be around these great leaders or, you know, this event?” It was just like. Felt like everyone's there has, you know, got to a point in life to where, like they probably didn't even experience a lot of things that, you know, some of us that were there went through, so to me, it was like sitting next to the great leader, or you know, the, the Dean, or stuff like that and it was just like, I, it was an honor to be sitting there, but it was fearful, because it was like, I had resentment of like, I'm not supposed to be here...then when they talked about college, I started thinking about all my flashbacks of being turned away from college ... It was really hard because I haven't even really attempted to follow through as far as going back to school because I remember just signing up for school. Going through the admissions. Going through the financial part. Sitting on my classes. Being in class for like two to three weeks, and then advisor come and gets me out of the class, and tells me, “Oh, because this is on my background”, I have to withdraw from the program because I wouldn't be able to get a job, or, you know, go anywhere after the thing, and in my head I'm thinking, “Well okay, well I understand I might not be able to do the job, but I can I still go through with the program because it keeps me on track and, and it puts me in a situation to where I don't have to fall back to society, and I wanted to get away from”, and they still just turned me away... it was really welcoming and that meant a lot to me because I've always had doors closed on me. (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

The fears did not seem to impact Zaynab’s confidence showing up in the space which was intriguing. When asked about how she felt she showed up and how she thought others showed up, she said (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

Well, I remember as I pulled up... First, I have my t-shirt, “Felonies do not Define the Future...” (Laughing.) So I did have that shirt on, so when walking into there I was already prepared to represent the new and approved me, the successful Zaynab. The one that went through PACE. The one that went through different types of organizations for training. The one that met Mr. Mears who got a job offer on the first day of meeting him. Who, working at the Prosecutor's Office now, to now being invited to great events like Marian University. So walking into there, I was walking in with the different headspace of like, “This is, this is me!” “This is what I've been waiting for!” Like I was really

excited, and when I walked in, like I said, it felt like, it felt like the sun, like God was just over, just like, “You're here!!!” Like it was. really amazing! I, I was serious like when I walked in the room, the event was well put together. I mean, from how you had it set up from the appetizers, to just the portfolio of the book, and how everything was labeled out, I loved it! Like I really felt like I was on a new level in life that I didn't think I would ever get to. The faculty members they were also kind. They were sweet. They listened...They sat there and, you know, they gave us time to speak. They also was understanding, and it was, it was great. Like, like I said, I didn't even... Like I remember applying for the Saint Joe program, like last year around November, but it was like actually being there at that event. They made me feel like I was already attending school (laughing.) ... (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

Looking back at the research, it is common for formerly incarcerated students to refer to their identity as clothing (Halkovic, 2015). Articles of clothing can be put on and taken off, as they put on and take off different identities to fit into different spaces and stay safe. Zaynab was intentional about how she would show up that morning of April 15, 2023 – proud of her past, her progress and her current identity. She owned it and made it clear to others that her past does not define her. But underneath, her fears and anxiety were still there when she started her day.

### **Navigating College & Stigma: Portfolio Feedback**

The purpose of the intervention tool, the Pre-College portfolio, was to help this population better navigate their return to college and face the stigma. While all the participants agreed the information in the portfolio was informative and should remain a part of future workshops, they shared some distinct perspectives on the materials and offered valuable recommendations to consider for next year's workshop.

#### ***Where are you in your journey?***

Lisa made a strong point that everyone is in a different place in their journey (personal communication, Aug 29, 2023), which impacts how helpful the materials are. She would recommend the portfolio to anyone, but it would be especially helpful to those who are still incarcerated and are getting close to a release date, as well as those who are early in the re-entry

process, so they can feel more prepared for the admissions and financial aid process sooner rather than later.

Angela shared a similar message. While Angela believed all the content was helpful, she pointed out that it depends on where the participants are in their journey (personal communication, May 9, 2023). It is difficult to say what the binder should include because everyone is coming at this from different perspectives and different stages of re-entry. Angela explained that she is further along than where others might be, so had she received this binder of materials a few years ago, it would have been more timely and helpful – “I think it's definitely an individual thing on that, for the most part. I think the longer you wait, for the most part, the more things you have structured in your life, and the harder it, the harder it is to find the room for school” (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023).

Angela did recommend more information on scholarships (Angela, personal communication, April 29, 2023); the other participants excitedly agreed, so this should be added to any future workshop or portfolio content. Angela said, “if we can minimize some of that needing for loans, especially for, you know, people that’s got all these other things going on, probably probation, and restitution, or whatever, scholarships would be very useful” (personal communication, April 29, 2023).

### ***Conquering Triggers & Overcoming Stigma***

Zaynab especially appreciated the admission and financial aid resources – funding is a significant obstacle, but she pointed out that some things in the binder could act as triggers depending on the audience (personal communication, April 29, 2023). There is good and bad to this - the intent was to hopefully provide the information and the support that builds the capacity to hopefully push past the triggers, and not let those triggers, or a person with an against voice,

be a barrier along their pathway. Zaynab speaks to these triggers and all the emotion she experienced coming to campus that Saturday (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

...it brought back so many memories. Like at one moment I wanted to cry, and one moment, I was really happy because being in that event, I didn't feel that. The moment the, the thing, the thoughts, and the feelings that I had with the previous colleges., and my experience, I didn't have that with Marian University. I felt welcomed. I felt loved. I felt like the energy in the room which is, it was like, "Okay, you're here." "This is to new adventures." "These are for new beginnings," and Lesley, like you, just opened me up with like, welcoming arms. Like from the moment you met me at the door like, "Hey Zaynab!" It was just, it felt so good, and just when walking in, and being able to speak to other individuals that were just open to talk, and I didn't feel like no one didn't want to talk to me because like, "Oh, who is she?" Or this and that? Or "Oh, she have a background?" Or "What is she here for?" You know, I didn't get that feeling so it was, it was really welcoming. I, I, I say that. (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

Zaynab moving in and out of different emotions was triggered by prior lived experiences, but she overcame and pushed through it. It is about building capacity. (Angela, personal communication, 2023, Apr. 15; Julie, personal observation, 2023, Apr. 2023)

As for the binder itself and whether it helped to overcome stigma or could help others overcome, Zaynab was torn (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023):

Hm, a good question. That one, it's kind of hard to answer cause it's like, yeah, it helped, but then again it didn't. So, like when I open that book and I...[see] in the biography of Angela, which I thought was amazing to seeing that, and reading her biography, like that was really inspirational to me. And then as you flipping through it, you see all these other things, and it was just like, I really have a shot! Like, I could do this! Like, I could really get involved and really, you know, a pays for a, a career that would work for me. But then it was just like, "Okay, it's a book." (Laughing.) Like, "What do I do with it?!" You know, like, "Just cause it's here, it doesn't mean I might qualify," you know? "What if I could really afford to even go to here?!" "I could barely afford to get here," so it's just like I was thinking about so many things! Like, like, I don't know... It, that one was [inaudible 0:25:42 – 0:25:44] challenging for me cause like like I said, [inaudible 0:25:47 – 0:25:50] knew me, who looked at that book and say, "I can utilize that." I really can. I can it and, and move forward with it, but it's just like that. Old me, in the back of my head like, "Okay, what am I gonna do with this?" I still haven't even gotten my transcripts. I keep saying I'm gonna get my transcripts. I haven't even bought 'em yet. I don't have don't have the money to buy these \$10 things, you know, and it's just like I keep making excuses in the way for myself. I'm like, "Zay, you could do it!" "Just do it!" It was like it was really challenging. I'm, I'm telling you when I got in there, looking at that book, I felt like I was already enrolled, but it was just in the back of my head is

like, “No, you're not there yet.” “You're not there yet.” You know, but it was really nice to see it so because like everything... I mean from just the labels of it like it had the labels on the side where you know which section you wanna go to, or you know, just a little sticky notes, and the [inaudible 0:26:48 – 0:26:48] the different colors, and everything and it was just like, “Lesley, that notebook was amazing!” Like I still have that notebook. (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

My interpretation of this is that Zaynab recognized the usefulness of the portfolio materials, but her response goes to show that there are such significant financial obstacles for these women - their burden is so heavy that a portfolio of information can only be so helpful. Zaynab’s narrative also speaks to Bell’s study. Bell’s qualitative study focuses on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in the United States, specifically the State of Arizona and how to provide more support to this population at the university level to better prepare formerly incarcerated women for college (Bell, 2020). Bell examines Possible Selves, which is the theory that “a person’s behavior is largely determined by what they think they will become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming” (2020, p. 7). The participants in Bell’s study must understand and explore their past educational selves, their present educational selves and develop a plan for their future educational selves to navigate systems, overcome oppression and move past the stigma. If they can increase self-efficacy and envision a positive future self – one who deserves to be in college - it can motivate behavior, just as a “feared future self” can also motivate behavior and decision making (Bell, 2020, p. 30). Zaynab speaks in multiple spaces to her struggle to overcome past traumas, but when she does, we see a new Zaynab.

### **Experiencing the Workshop: Enhancements for the Future**

The goal of the workshop was to help this population better navigate their return to college and face past trauma, triggers and stigma and build the capacity to push beyond it. While all the participants agreed the workshop was informative and inspiring and should be offered in

the future, they shared some unique perspectives on the content and organization of the day, offering valuable recommendations to consider for next year's workshop.

### *Emotions & Energy*

Zaynab shared how she experienced being on campus for the April 15<sup>th</sup> workshop (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

I was welcomed with love, joy, good energy when I walked into that event...I really want to go back to school. I, I just wanna to go and finish and get a degree. I think about [unintelligible 0:27:40 - 0:27:40]. I think about [unintelligible 0:27:43 - 0:27:43]. I think about all of that, so we've kind of been put on hold and sometimes I feel like I do make excuses to it because I'm afraid of what might happen instead of actually just seeing what happens? But I know in my heart that Marian is where I would like to go if I do go back to school. It was just like pulled up to the university. Well first off it was away from where I'm used to so it gives me that peace. Like that self [unintelligible 0:28:15 - 0:28:15] relaxation on my way, just thinking and like I mean, it was beautiful. Like the university is beautiful. The staff was beautiful. The event was beautiful. The causes of what they're doing was beautiful and I always want to be a part of anything that's willing to help give individuals a second chance at life. (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

Angela shared in her individual interview that all the information from the workshop should remain and specifically mentioned financial aid, admissions and the "how to's" and referenced her own lived experience, working with mothers with justice system involvement, who are considering going back to school (personal communication, May 9, 2023). She explained that "sometimes it's that insecurity of not knowing what to do that prevents" progress and keeps them from feeling lost in the process, provides some kind of foundation and some confidence (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023):

So I think all the informative information should stay. So, you know, financial aid, and the admissions...with all those things on how to's because I... My own experience and working with individuals, mothers, who are, um, considering going back to school. Who have, um, justice system involvement. There's sometimes it's that insecurity of not knowing what to do that prevents. So that, that, that information I think is really good to stay, um, so the individual doesn't feel lost in the process or feel, or has some information to build on so they, they have some kind of foundation, and, and feel like they have some, um, confidence.

Ashton shared that she would recommend the workshop and offered the following explanation (personal communication, June 1, 2023):

I would recommend it only because it might give somebody a peace of mind. And our ...somebody's client might really benefit from that. There might be something life changing, and to let others know, like there's not only classes that you have to go sit in all day long, or there's other ways around it. You can, you can do virtual. It was just informative. Kind of put you at ease, and, and kind of put me at ease as far as knowing how the program is and in the steps to get into the program, and what programs are available and, and things like that. So yeah, I definitely would.

Ashton went on to explain that not everyone is a strong reader, so she recommended thinking about other audiences who may prefer visual or audio presentation (personal communication, June 1, 2023):

...I also would think about people that don't necessarily... They're not necessarily that strong in reading. So for a, for some, something that could be added is like a QR Code that leads to like a video or something because some people might want to listen. I've been finding out more and more, with like talking to my clients, a lot of them don't read, so they found out about PACE only because they were able to listen to the video. They couldn't read any of the words that were on the screen, but they knew what the lady said. (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023):

Zaynab's reply to whether she would recommend the workshop to others touches on the importance of the intervention tool as well (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

I absolutely would recommend it. I would recommend it because not only does it help individual, these individual's previous convictions, but these mothers with children to be able to access education...one of the challenges, especially this month, it's mental awareness so and they talked about that from disability to, you know, just the mental state, or just you know, um, the resources that you can use, and this binder is compact with so much information that a lot of individuals could take to, to be able to obtain the education that they need, you know, and it's, it's a really great resource book, and to me I think it's gonna be a great program. Like I, if I would've have had this opportunity when I was going through my, my trials and tribulations, I would have hopped on it like that, you know, just because it gave me access to be able to go forward ... it's just like education is really important, and then with the, the criminal justice system, being able to have an education instead of, you know, being locked up, or having to do probation, or having to do certain things, or having the opportunity to be able to utilize, you know, that time being down, making something positive, I think it's brilliant!... (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

### *Employment Services & Career Pathways*

It was previously mentioned that future workshops need enhanced content in the career services and career pathways category. Advisors lack knowledge on career pathways for formerly incarcerated students, and there are limited and inconsistent services, leaving formerly incarcerated students as their own advocates (Murillo, 2021).

There is confusion and mixed feeling among the participants, specifically about how to represent gaps in employment on resumes and how to reply to interview questions (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023):

Because even to this day, I have so much trouble trying to answer questions about the gap of employment. Other people come straight out and just tell them, like I worked for the State of Indiana. Well, to me, I feel like that's dishonest because I didn't work for the State of Indiana, I was forced to, you know. So how I, I just don't. I'm uncomfortable answering those types of questions still.

Angela agreed with Lisa and recommended inviting more people to future workshops to discuss employment opportunities for those with justice involvement. She offered some ideas on how to strengthen the content that focuses on career services and job opportunities outside of Marion County (Angela, personal communication, May 9, 2023):

...to talk about employment opportunities or the, the, the resume stuff would be, would great because are ways to... There's, there, there's are some really great things that can be done with resumes that are completely legit for people who have Justice System involvement. And maybe even talk about some career ideas that are well matched and suited, and not limited, because I don't want to limit peoples and, but there's some things that we all know that if you have Justice System involvement, you just can't do. Not today, right? Maybe down the line, but not today. So maybe highlighting some, some, some fields that... Because some people just don't even know what they what to go back for and so like, you know and, there are a lot of things that don't require licenses and stuff like that, that people aren't thinking about; the nonprofit industry, you know? The addictions, you know, many different business stuff. And there's probably other things too, but you know, just like maybe highlighting some degrees. And then also... and I think we talked about this before, some scholarship opportunities, and what would I take away? And I don't know what I would take away because that would be hard, but what I do think, is that if the time was limited to a half day instead of an all day? There would

have been way more participants. But what do you take out, because it was all, you know, that's where it becomes difficult.

Bringing more options to the workshop for career pathways would be helpful to participants like Lisa, who shared that she just does not know what she wants to do or even what options are available for her outside of working in counseling and working with others who are facing addiction. Angela herself may be an appropriate leader of a portion of the career pathways session in future workshops. Angela's idea about a half-day workshop is worth consideration as well.

### ***Organization & Design: Virtual Participation & Length***

Angela's idea about doing a half day workshop is interesting – it was a long day for sure, and it may not be best for busy, single mothers – remaining engaged all day took capacity of participants and the university volunteers. The group also discussed offering half day workshops on Webex (personal communications, April 29, 2023). Offering multiple workshops shorter in length would allow a more in-depth look into career pathways and degree options, as well as the other content areas in which the participants desired more time and content. Zaynab touched on this a bit in her individual interview (personal communication, May 16, 2023):

I don't think I would take anything out because everything works perfectly. If anything, I think that we should use more of the end to maybe give it more time, because that end kind of went over the time, you know, everyone spoke. Like everyone was a deep conversation and so, you know, the enrollment process was really great, but I think that should have been a little bit shorter. So where everybody that was still there got could've been involved more into that deep conversation that we had...So I think, like as far as presentation for the Marian University should be shortened, and maybe combined a little bit better, because everything that they talked about was in the binder, which was amazing binder, because you find everything. Like literally things that they didn't even talk about you seen in there. It was like, "Oh, okay." Like I loved it...(Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

Zaynab expressed her love of the afternoon session several times in the group debrief and

individual interview (personal communications, April 15, April 29 and May 16, 2023) – it was clearly a powerful experience for her and emerged as a recurring theme in her responses, as well as the others who mentioned it – either in the debrief or the individual interview. There could be more time for the deep conversations that inspired them if we divided up content into multiple workshops. We can split out the morning information sessions, enhance them based on the participants’ recommendations and have a half day workshop that would mirror the afternoon session on April 15, 2023. How might this look?

Future workshops could allow participants to attend virtually. Maybe a half day workshop would have been the better move than a full day – Angela may be correct that shortening the length of Workshop #1 may attract more participants, and maybe offering a virtual option for those who live in other Indiana counties may be helpful so that they do not have to make such a long drive like Lisa did. I agree with Angela’s theory that we lost some participants *because* they're single mothers. And, that's a significant data point.

Angela (personal communication, May 9, 2023) interjected that “there was something very special about the in person. I mean, I think you can do it virtually, but then you lose some of that. You lose something there.” Ashton seemed to agree with Angela and said that being the only participant on Webex presented some challenges (personal communication, June 1, 2023):

I guess the challenge was not being present, and there were people that were present, like if it would have been all online, it would have been, you know different... I mean, like to go places, of course you like to take a little field trip, but you know, sometimes your schedule just doesn't allow that. (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023):

There is value to the in-person workshop building capacity just by physically showing up; thinking back to Lisa’s three-hour field trip to the workshop increased her self-confidence, even Lisa acknowledged that this made her aware of her own progress. This aligns with Sherman’s theory on strengths identification (2017). The formerly incarcerated mothers in Sherman’s study

acknowledged the importance of internal strength which they find within themselves by increasing capacity by making positive choices (2017). Lisa's progress, choosing to travel to the workshop on April 15<sup>th</sup> by herself, increased her inner-strength and allowed her to focus on who she is now, not who she was at the time of her crimes.

The challenge to continuing the full-day, in-person workshop is that there is so much content to share, and the participants believe that nothing should be eliminated (personal communications, April 29, 2023) – so how does this look? Should there be several half-day workshops that focus on specific topics and turning it into a series? Should there be in-person options for Marion and surrounding Indiana counties but also virtual options?

There was also the recommendation to offer the workshop and portfolio to mothers who are still incarcerated but close to release and/or mothers who have been recently released (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023). In this way, it would be similar to Project Prove (Case, et al., 2005), a program that began with the women inside prison facilities in Michigan, who then extended their program support and services upon re-entry, which most inside programs do not do. The earlier in their journey, the more useful the intervention (Angela and Lisa, personal communications, May 9, 2023, May 12, 2023). This would first need to be approved by the Indiana Department of Corrections and perhaps also other government agencies or organizations.

### ***Technology Enhancements***

Lisa's recommendations about technology and how we may be able to better design a presentation by walking through programs and processes is a fantastic idea and could be easily accomplished (personal communication, May 12, 2023):

There's different programs that, um, for technology. Maybe if we could have like a list of what programs are. Like with the library, you know, how we get into that, but what are some of these programs like so PowerPoint. Like I know what PowerPoint is, but what if the next person doesn't, you know? And if I know it, we're lucky, um, but there's just

little things like that that if an interviewer ask you like, do you know PowerPoint? Do you know this? Do you know this? Like I know those words, but have I ever used it? Do I know? Because offline and online are different? So I think that's the only thing that I would say could be added was just the hesitancy. I know that I experience trying to interview and explain certain things. How do you do that? (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

This could be touched upon in future workshops, but the ideal place for this content may be the intervention tool: the Pre-College Portfolio. The binder could include instructions and reference websites about PPT, Word and Excel, and we could provide video tutorial links electronically, just as we did with the Canvas and Webex/Zoom tutorials.

***The “Against” Viewpoint: How would this impact capacity?***

In the group debrief, Angela challenged the group to consider inviting the other side to the table. It has been acknowledged that there is a portion of our society who does not agree with free college or for supporting those with backgrounds in higher education. The research shows this and addresses those who believe people with incarceration experience and justice involvement are a safety threat on college campuses.

Angela’s thought to the group motivated quite a bit of debate among us all (personal communication, August 29, 2023):

...this is gonna sound weird, but maybe somebody at the table who is against stuff, because for me to understand why somebody has an issue, I need to hear from them. And then you also have the opportunity of seeing how... Like how to change that mindset. I’m in bubbles, right? So I'm in recovery bubble. I'm in the just so where I have people that I'm not one of those that stay in that bubble where everybody that I know is in recovery. Like I, I try to stay out of those bubbles. I see people in those bubbles. I see people in, but I'm now in that justice involved bubble. So, like everything, and every, I mean from my job to everything I'm involved in, it's with people on the same side as me. Well, you can't change narratives, and minds, and really make movement with just those people. (Angela, personal communication, August 29, 2023)

On the other hand, this could be too much. I intentionally did not include anyone with an

against view out of concern it would be too much and decrease capacity among participants. My concerns echo what Murillo explains in the Possibility Report – that formerly incarcerated students face so many obstacles that if they do not have the appropriate support, they will drop out (2021). I did not want anyone dropping out of the study or leaving the workshop, not to mention carrying the emotional burden of knowing something I planned caused enough pain for one of them to flee. While Zaynab thought Angela’s recommendation was potentially good, she also worried how that might traumatize some of the participants (personal communication, April, 29, 2023), because what if they said or did something that offended someone (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023):

I already be feeling like I'm not included in a lot of things, so like just hearing someone you know saying, “Oh, I don't feel like this is safe, “or “I don't feel like you know anyone should want to do this,” or just the community or stuff like that, and just hearing the negatives, whatever. It might do something to me to where like... It might take me to a different, you know, scenario like, “Well, why do I want to be a part of this?” You know? Like what if he say something wrong to me? Or what if he say something that I really don't agree and it might just be really hindering me. (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023)

This was my concern – when does it become too much for participants who are already so hindered and battle internal struggles daily? Zaynab shared a story about an event she attended in December (personal communication, 2023, Apr. 29). She was advocating for education for formerly incarcerated people but was questioned by the mother of an incarcerated son (personal communication, April 29, 2023): *how are you with the prosecutor's office, but you're here advocating? What side are you on? Pick a side.* Zaynab felt so embarrassed and carried this home with her after the December event and even into her job. It impacted her work and made her question herself all over again.

I loved this conversation. The purpose of the workshop, and the portfolio, and the

research, and everything happening is about capacity - building capacity to take that next step, or to find a way to make progress. Angela's proposal is intriguing, makes sense and is worth exploration; however, Zaynab's concern is valid. If a future workshop includes an "against" party and perspective, then the leaders of the workshop will need to move with incredible caution and be able to pinpoint when the heat gets turned up too high, causing participants' capacity to decrease to a dangerous level at a pace they may not be able to handle.

I confessed to Angela that her idea was recommended by others several months back in the proposal stage of my study, and I decided not to do it because I was scared (personal communication, August 29, 2023). I was worried that putting that person into the day at any point would have the impact that Zaynab described. Thinking back to the afternoon session on April 15, 2023, when we all sat in a circle, talking and engaging...had someone been a part of that who would have spoken out against this population and their deserving of college, what would that have done to the room? I was terrified to do it because of exactly what Zaynab said.

This portion of the debrief discussion made me question myself, *did I maybe do a disservice to the group, by not having that voice? Would it have increased their capacities with that voice, or would it have maybe had the opposite impact, and turned off any of the participants, and made them feel unwelcome and maybe even walk out?* This was not an anticipated question, but I asked the group due to how the debrief unfolded (personal communication, April 29, 2023).

Lisa shared that she probably would not have felt as comfortable (personal communication, April 29, 2023). "I don't feel like I would have been as comfortable, especially if someone spoke out against education for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people" (Lisa, personal communication, April 29, 2023). She quickly reminded me of the backlash we've

witnessed over “free college”. College students resent that justice involved students are “privileged and special”, getting free access to resources and education that they did not have and believe “incarcerated individuals were damaged, dangerous, aggressive, and ignorant” (Ott & McTier, 2020, p. 299). When Lisa explains that she earned some of her college credits while being incarcerated, some have asked, *Well, don't you have to take it over because how could it be the same?* They assume their education was handed to them or that it was watered down. Lisa concluded that it would have decreased her capacity (personal communication, April 29, 2023):

You know, so having to face that. I don't know because I've come to find out, like I've come to realize that my go to instead of anger is withdrawal. I like to just shut down and avoid. I avoid every situation that I'm not comfortable in instead of being angry about it, and I think that that could have been possibility for me as just to avoid the whole conversation when it would turn to that. (Lisa, personal communication, April 29, 2023):

Zaynab agreed with Lisa and took it further by explaining much of our society does not want them in the community much less the classroom. She wants to find a way to share the lived experiences of individuals who are coming out of prison, to help society understand what they must go through, “trying to still feel welcome in the world that's so cruel because of their previous involvement with their criminal justice system” (personal communication, April 29, 2023).

Angela's awareness of the others' apprehension about bringing an “against” viewpoint into the space, she offered a compromise – to invite someone with an “against” viewpoint to be an observer and listen in on a future workshop from the balcony – just listening, not participating or engaging. The observer could be given a pre-survey and then be given a post-survey to determine if any of the content or stories of the participants opened the observer's heart and mind (personal communication, April 29, 2023). This could be helpful – to determine if a workshop

like this may open minds of others who may be against second chances toward education and re-entering communities.

This would have been well beyond the scope of my study but is a legitimate idea for future research and future workshops. It may help us identify where we “need to chop away at things” (Angela, personal communication, April 23, 2023, Apr. 29) in hopes of making progress. This would be a test of Allport’s intergroup contact theory, which claims that prejudice is learned when a particular group is assigned objectionable qualities in society (1954). There is evidence to support intergroup contact theory regarding formerly incarcerated people – the more exposure to this population, the more the majority group softens (Binnall et al., 2021). It would be interesting to see if an observer with an “against” viewpoint might soften toward the participants after hearing their narratives.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the mothers' voices in the debrief and interviews provides insight into the research questions - what was learned, what was overlooked and what remains a mystery in need of further research. What surfaces as most interesting was the underestimated difficulty in getting the mothers to physically show up on the college campus; many limitations were shared by anticipated participants – from work and childcare issues, to conflicts with children's spring sports activities, but it leaves me curious about what was running underneath all those conflicts and whether fear, self-image and anxiety was operating beneath the surface.

This may be connected to what was uncovered about the length and delivery of the workshop itself. It was a full day workshop on a springtime Saturday, and the participants wondered if it was just too much for some of the women. One idea was to have a half-day, in-person workshop like the afternoon session that focuses on emotional capacity and community, especially since the binder covered the majority of the morning's topics. Another option was to keep the full day but offer it during a different time of year or offer multiple workshops year-round – some of them in-person and some of them via Webex to accommodate a larger audience and potential students throughout the state of Indiana. A series of mini workshops may better meet the mothers where they are in their lives; there should be multiple ways for the mothers to enter their journey to college.

### **Research Questions**

*What are the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers in their journey to pursue college?*

The participants described their experiences pursuing college to be traumatic and hindering. Though the mothers are in different phases of their journey, they all spoke to varying levels of fear, shame, and anxiety over college. From being shamed through an admissions

process and being removed from classes a few weeks into a semester, to taking on a fictional persona to hide her past, these mothers shared their lived experiences and how those experiences contributed to low self-esteem and impacted how they showed up at the workshop on April 15th. A few shared that even asking questions was too much for them. Regardless of where the participants were in their lives and how long since re-entry, they were each nervous in their own way and had fears and uncertainties walking through the door that day on campus. Just showing up in that space increased capacity.

All four of the participants said they were blown away by how supportive the Marian faculty and staff were and how welcome they felt in the workshop space. I learned how important it was for them to feel a sense of belonging on a college campus after prior lived experiences left them feeling judged and unwelcome. I learned how painful their previous experiences were and how that limited them and their college self-efficacy.

I learned that the participants were acutely aware of their surroundings; they noticed the body language of each other and of the faculty and staff members who entered the space as guest speakers and presenters and sensed their open mindedness, which helped to lessen their fears and decrease anxiety as the morning sessions progressed. The more support they receive and the more members of the college community who become available to help them through basic barriers, such as completing an online application and answering questions about technology, financial aid and resources, their anxiety decreases, and college self-efficacy and capacity increases, slowly creating a sense of belonging.

***How do the formerly incarcerated mothers perceive external obstacles to hinder their capacity as they pursue post-secondary education?***

I learned that not having basic information can deter them from pursuing college because of the fear of asking questions and being perceived as incompetent. One of the participants explained that one of the biggest hurdles is not knowing *what* to ask *whom* and feeling intimidated to ask a question. There is also the fear of being asked questions about their past and crimes; this is perceived to be a significant obstacle that hinders their desire to continue with the admissions and enrollment process.

The significance by which the external obstacles have hindered the participants was underestimated. Participants shared their triggers and the emotional ups and downs they experienced on previous journeys to college and the anxiety brought on by memories of being turned away and judged, inhibiting their motivation to return.

***How do the formerly incarcerated mothers perceive the stereotypes about mothers with criminal histories and how does the stigma impede their capacity to return to post-secondary education?***

I learned that mothers are all in different places because of the ages of their children. Mothers with young children face different obstacles than mothers with grown children. I learned that the mothers were significantly torn on choosing themselves over their children, and unknowingly, I put many of them in this position because to attend my workshop, they would have had to have missed a child's sports practice or game or other activity. Many anticipated participants had conflicts surrounding children which prevented them from attending the workshop. I underestimated how challenging a choice like this was for the mothers. What I was

unable to learn was what was at the core of this inner struggle to choose themselves – to choose their own betterment or advancement. Who did they think they were betraying?

This may be explained, in part, by one of the women in the pre-diagnostic interview; K.B. explained that “coming out of incarceration, there is always that pressure...I cannot dare miss a soccer game...even if I justify it in my own head, then I feel the guilt and the shame when I am around other people...” (personal communication, 2021). Mothers face gender bias because they have not or do not sacrifice themselves completely for their children. This issue presented itself when several participants were faced with choosing themselves by attending an all-day Saturday workshop for college or attending their child’s soccer game or other sporting event or activity.

What I did not learn from the participants in this study was how they perceive these societal pressures and stereotypes about being considered “a bad mom” as limiting capacity to return to college. Does being in Mitchell & Davis’ bad mom box (2019) increase anxiety about returning to the college campus and classroom? The participants shared that being a mother, especially a single mother with younger children, does present additional challenges and barriers; however, it was not surmised that societal stereotypes about mothers and the double stigma further complicated their capacity to return to college. This remains a mystery worthy of additional exploration in future workshops and interventions.

***How can Pre-College Workshops help formerly incarcerated mothers build capacity within themselves to overcome the external barriers blocking their pathway to college?***

The participants shared that they would recommend the workshop and found the content to be helpful, but it was clear in their debrief and individual interviews that the afternoon session was the most powerful. Shortening the morning session, especially since much of the material

was available in the portfolio, to focus more heavily on the afternoon session would have been preferred by the participants. They all agreed that the afternoon session seemed to have special significance, as they were allowed the space to reflect, breathe and share their stories; the faculty and staff shared along with the participants, developing a deep connection, which appeared to have significant meaning and lasting impact.

Curiosity remains as to whether day care availability the day of the workshop would have increased the number of participants. Taking it a step further, had their children been included in the day, how would that have decreased anxiety over choosing themselves over their children? In future workshops, exploring how the mothers' children can be engaged in workshop sessions as individuals and alongside their mothers will be a priority; policies and procedures at the organization for having children on campus would be considered.

As for intended audience, only mothers with former incarceration experience were invited to be participants, but the content provided in the workshop and portfolio, arguably, could be for any individual with incarceration experience or justice involvement. Although that space was distinct to mothers, the content of the workshop and portfolio could be for anyone.

***How can a Pre-College portfolio help this population better navigate their return to college and face the stigma?***

All participants agreed the information in the portfolio was informative and should remain a part of future workshops to varying degrees but also offered valuable recommendations to consider for future workshops. A key takeaway was that each mother is in a different phase in her journey which influences how helpful the materials are. Participants would recommend the portfolio to anyone, but it would be especially helpful to those who are still incarcerated and close to a release date, as well as those who are early in the re-entry process. It was

recommended to coordinate with leadership at the department of corrections on how materials may be shared with those who are in their final stages of incarceration.

Upon re-entry, the mothers often face significant financial and technology related barriers. While the portfolio information was regarded as valuable and made them feel excited and welcomed, it then also triggered concerns about finances and other barriers, making them question how possible college really is for them. More information on scholarships and grants would be helpful to supplement financial aid. The participants agreed that there should be additional resources on how to navigate these obstacles, such as applying for scholarships. More video presentations and tutorials, walking through programs and processes, such as using the online library, creating PowerPoint presentations, downloading word and excel and uploading documents and video to e-mail, were recommended.

The portfolio helped to overcome stigma but acted as a trigger in other ways. One participant described how she was moving in and out of different emotions when reviewing the portfolio; it triggered prior lived experiences, but she overcame and pushed through it. She recognized the usefulness of the portfolio materials, but her response goes to show that there are such significant obstacles for these women - their burden is so heavy that a portfolio of information alone can only be so helpful. Overcoming and believing the are college material may be the biggest barrier.

I learned that Bell's qualitative study, which examines Possible Selves Theory - the theory that "a person's behavior is largely determined by what they think they will become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming" (2020, p. 7) may be the most significant factor in increasing capacity and self-efficacy. While the workshop and portfolio are valuable interventions and tools to increase self-efficacy, the mothers must be able to envision a

positive future self – one who deserves to be in college. This was confirmed by the participants' narratives.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH & CONTINUING THE WORK**

There is much work to be done, and I would like to continue some of the work beyond the completion of this study and degree. Areas in need of the most work and the most priority revolve around establishing degree options, career pathways and community partnerships; developing a mentoring program, and applying for grants to offset financial barriers. We also need to get the word out – statewide – to Indiana communities that justice involved mothers are welcome. While the workshops and portfolio may be helpful to a broader audience, the focus will continue to be mothers with former incarceration experience and justice involvement.

#### ***Degree Options, Career Pathways & Partnerships***

Help with job placement, community partners and pipelines, and career pathways in Indiana outside Marion County is a priority. Lisa's frustration with a lack of options in Elkhart County is evident when she explains, "There is nothing here for us! Like I couldn't even get a, a job at the license branch as a freaking like receptionist or whatever, you know? It's because I have the past that I have, so I really don't know where to go." (personal communication, April 29, 2023). Even with her bachelor's degree to be earned this August 2023, what job can she land? And will it be a job that pays enough to repay student loans? For mothers like Lisa, who do not believe it is a healthy choice to pursue a career in counseling and addiction recovery, what are other degree options lead to career that pay enough to support a family and repay debt?

Angela recommended establishing a pipeline to the prosecutor's office and their current initiatives in Marion County to eliminate obstacles to jobs and to college, such as the expungement program and driver's license reinstatements (personal communication, May 9, 2023). Angela also recommended that we "look at a very specific population, and doing the mothers that have been formerly incarcerated, I think they're... I think they belong with Marian.

They belong with you, I mean, the research has been done at Marian. I think that is a great next step...looking at some programming that fits them.” (personal communication, May 9, 2023)

### ***Mentoring Program***

Students and formerly incarcerated mothers who authored *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students* said that peer-to-peer mentoring would do wonders (2019), but so few of these programs exist. San Francisco State and Rutgers are mentioned in the research for building peer-to-peer support networks, mentoring programs and other support programs for college students with criminal records (Ott & McTier, 2020). University staff and faculty could have an opportunity to mentor a new student, from enrollment and admissions through curriculum and job placement.

### ***Financial Obstacles***

Zaynab asked about financial help for mothers returning to college and their children in the group debrief (personal communication, April 29, 2023):

Now is there ways where like we could like get grants for these women with children who have stipulations to help them that, that keeps them from moving forward, as far as like giving grants like every semester to kind of help cover gas, or maybe utility bills, from the ones that are not working full time, or maybe just need a little assistance so they continue, you know, pursuing their education. Like how do we go about as far as finding the resource for that to where we make the program successful, so we get more outcome from the program when we have more resources to be able to help these individuals? ... (Zaynab, personal communication, April 29, 2023)...Because for me, I'm a single mother of three...I'm still trying to be involved in, you know, sports for my children, going to church, still being a part of different organizations, and sometimes like, “Hey, I could use the extra funding,” but you know, individuals that coming out of those situations, and just who don't have housing, or who don't have jobs. Or, or in the process of looking. Those extra funds will come a long way to be able to help them utilize that because cause when, when. One thing I do know, when you're coming out of transition from that type of lifestyle, and you have the opportunity to do better, as long as the doors are constantly keep opening, or at least you're getting the right resources, you're gonna to be successful. but when you're coming out of that situation, and you're constantly getting doors blocked, and you don't have the financial help that you need, you're going to drop tremendously, and you're gonna back to your old lifestyle, and you're gonna go back to

that. So it's just this program I think is going to be amazing and I cannot wait to see where this goes. (Zaynab, personal communication, May 16, 2023)

The workshop and portfolio offered wonderful resources on which we can expand and contributed to increased capacity among participants, but the financial burden still lingers. The university can open their doors, as Zaynab explains, but if the women do not have the financial help they need, those doors are blocked again. “But it, it’s always gonna come down to the financial component of the biggest barrier. That's gonna always be the biggest barrier, so yeah...” (Angela, personal communication, April 29, 2023).

### ***Committee Formation: Faculty & Participants Come Together***

This discussion motivated me and the participants, Angela, Zaynab and Lisa to continue the work and form a committee group with five of the faculty volunteers from the workshop on April 15, 2023. This will bring faculty to the same table as justice involved mothers to work on progress together which will only continue to build capacity. The afternoon of the workshop was such an incredible experience for everyone that we discussed how it might look if we formed a committee to continue the work – and what would that work look like? Our priorities will include establishing more contacts and community partners who can help advise on degree options and career pathways for our justice involved mothers who want to go to college, as well as exploring a campus based mentoring program. Establishing a mentoring program will be the first goal of the group. When formerly incarcerated students enroll, they struggle to get guidance from academic advisors and are limited in access to peer mentors and university resources (Bumgardner et al., 2019). The more we can connect with formerly incarcerated students right away, the better we can design their pathways to re-enter education (Bumgardner et al., 2019). The women have shared that the financial component to return to college is often the biggest barrier, so long term, the group will explore local non-profits with whom to partner on grants and

scholarship opportunities to supplement financial aid and pay for college-related expenses, such as textbooks, computers, and transportation. Our first meeting was Tuesday, July 25<sup>th</sup>.

Lisa pointed out that staying focused may be the most challenging work – the upkeep of the program, future workshops and the priorities of the committee (personal communication, May 12, 2023):

So is your next step, because I know you, I see you not giving up; therefore I see your final like thesis paper, whatever it is that you have to you know, the, the final part of this, being put to use in a place that affects more than just Marian and that doesn't even have to be directly from you. You know? I think that as far reaching as it has been so far, that it's going to be shared and I feel like your next step is the upkeep of it I would say, because I know that you're not the type just to, to give up on something that you start. It's been proven. Look at the school. Look at, look at the college prison, you know? So I feel like that would be your next step... We'll probably start with Marian, and then, you know, once Marian starts something, and it the word-of-mouth travels. Like, Marian has this type of students and they're succeeding, then other colleges are gonna do it, and it's going to be more accepting. Colleges might be more accepting, and understanding, maybe even a little bit more helpful to individuals, not just mothers, not just women, but individuals that are choosing the right path, after the wrong one. You know? I think that by Marian opening their arms to people... trying to think of the word that I want to use. What is the word I'm looking for? But not like norm, you know? The, the not... Opening their arms to unnormal college kids, I know I have almost a bachelor degree, and I don't know if "unnormal" is word, but I'm using. (Laughing.) (Lisa, personal communication, May 12, 2023)

The raw advice of the women on how to improve their experiences and our continued recognition of their guidance on how to make progress around obstacles along their pathways embraces this phenomenological approach which is motivating us to create an infrastructure of support for the women who will continue hereafter.

### ***Social Media & Advertising***

Lisa tells us “word-of-mouth travels” (personal communication, May 12, 2023), so we need to get the word out! What's the next steps for higher education? Ashton spoke to the power of social media and advertising – an effort to get the message out there and send an invitation

that the college or university truly welcomes this population and that the organization is taking steps to remove some barriers and obstacles (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023):

I think it should be more advertisement because people don't really know about those programs. We know that it's a school, but we don't know that we can apply to that school, and we won't be denied, or questioned about our background. So just more advertisement. Like if I was to see that flyer on a billboard, I would be like really happy. You know, or even a sign a yard sign. You know, to let people know, like you're not excluded, because I never even knew that that was a thing until Ang walked up and was like, "Hey, can you participate in this with me, or would you like to?" I looked at the flyer, and I found out that day. But it's not advertised that people can, you know, come to the school and, and they'll be given a chance. It's, it's just not advertised. I feel like. I don't know if there's such a thing, but so, at one of my previous jobs, I was Community Outreach. You know what I mean? And I got the name out in a matter of months. People didn't even know that my old job still was open. I got on Facebook, and I got like a hundred an fifty-two "K" shares. I had to shut down the post because I kept getting messages from around the world at all hours of the night. I think that advertisement is the key, uh, because the way of the world now is technology, and if it's not technology, everybody travels. Everybody is traveling on a bus or a car. They're gonna look at a sign. (Ashton, personal communication, June 1, 2023)

### CAPSTONE SUMMARY

Halkovic & Green (2015) send the message that by embracing the gifts of formerly incarcerated students, institutions of higher education put themselves in a unique position to help them make the transition from prison to community. This study presented an intervention to identify the structural and internal barriers that hinder formerly incarcerated mothers' progress to gain the support and services to better themselves, redefine self-image and increase their capacity to move through the stigma on their own, while also making progress in our institutions and communities in which we invite the gifts of those who have been stigmatized to strengthen our spaces and open our minds. My life has been transformed and enriched by the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, mothers and their gifts.

Danny Murillo's *Possibility Report* was motivation for my intervention. This was a meaningful goal of my capstone – to create a local “blueprint” (2021) for formerly incarcerated mothers who pursue college in Central Indiana, narrowing the scope to address a few significant college specific structural barriers unique to formerly incarcerated mothers, and design a portfolio and pre-college workshop program to help prepare mothers for college. This was accomplished, but at the recommendation of a faculty volunteer, what we have looks more like a “compass” than a blueprint (personal communication, 2023), a compass because it is vital for navigation, and we hope it keeps us making movement in positive directions.

The focus on college self-efficacy in Bell's study also energized this study – “the idea that increasing a person's college self-efficacy while decreasing their perception of structural barriers, will prompt greater motivation to pursue post-secondary education” (2020, p. 7). When they believe they can do it and believe they belong in college and have every right to that

education, the structural barriers do not seem so insurmountable, and this is demonstrated through much of Zaynab's narratives and lived experiences.

Murillo and Bell heavily guided and informed my intervention, as well as the literature from other scholars and formerly incarcerated women on structural barriers, the power of self-esteem and self-efficacy. In exploring the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers, my intention was to share their struggles, challenges and hardships – but also their victories and successes - in hopes we may replace prejudice and judgment with empathy and opportunity.

The incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women from the Indiana Women's Prison drove this study, some of whom are the authors of the Lumina Report, *Spotlight on Indiana: Barriers to higher education for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students*. They do much of the work for us; they use their voices and tell us what we need to do if we listen. Their recommendations guided my intervention's focus on building deliberate pathways for the formerly incarcerated in Indiana to enter campus and experience college, not just as students but gift-givers.

It's in the rawness of the women's words that we find truth unaltered by our own interpretations – it is where the essence lives in a phenomenological, authentic approach which really spotlights the voices of the women in the study. Continual recognition of their advice and feedback will strengthen future workshops and initiatives. This research study has ended, but the work will continue to embrace progress toward creating an infrastructure of support for the women.

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*Appendix A:*



***Questionnaire for Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Pre-Intervention Workshop #1:  
Intervention Tool - Pre-College Portfolio***

1. Please share your experience with re-entry pertaining to your pathway to college. What was it like for you? What were your biggest challenges or obstacles?
2. How did your role as a mother impact your re-entry? How did it impact your return to college?
3. Please describe your experiences with stereotypes and stigma upon re-entry and your return to college.
4. For the Pre-College Portfolio, please mark which of the following content would be helpful in the table below by placing an “X” in the middle column, then please share how and why the content would be helpful to you in the far right column:

Portfolio Content	“X” if helpful	Explanation of how and why it would be helpful.
Budgeting and personal finance information		
“How to guide” on e-mail, Word, and basic technology		
Library resources		
Resume building		
Job searches and interview preparation		
Financial aid, Pell and		
E-mail etiquette & communications with professors		
Transcripts and transfer credit		
Degree options and career pathways		

5. Please list anything that you believe would be helpful to have in the Pre-college Portfolio that is not listed above.

*Appendix B: Letter of Consent, Questionnaires*



**Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Pursuing College**

\_\_\_\_\_, 2022/2023

Re: Capstone Project for Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership: *Lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers: Navigating societal stigmas and barriers impeding their pathways to pursue higher education*

Dear Participant:

You have agreed to engage in a Pre-College Workshop Series, which includes responding to the attached questionnaire. Responses will be used to prepare the Pre-Intervention Workshop Tool, the Pre-College Portfolio, which will be a resource in the Pre-College Workshop Series for mothers with incarceration experience who are pursuing college.

Other mothers with incarceration experience have been invited to participate in this research by responding to the attached questionnaire. The information you provide may offer a better understanding of the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers who pursue a college education and the structural barriers experienced in the college process.

You are not being compensated for responding to the questionnaire, and your responses are being given voluntarily. The responses to these questionnaires will be used in a qualitative capstone study, defended to a committee in an open public forum to satisfy a doctorate degree requirement, and may be published. Your name and responses will remain confidential. You will be referenced and cited as you permit and approve in writing.

You may withdraw your consent at any time and may decline to answer any question that may make you uncomfortable. Your participation is valued, and your responses are appreciated.

Sincerely,

*Lesley Neff*

Lesley Neff  
Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership Student  
Marian University  
3200 Cold Spring Road  
Indianapolis, IN 46220

*Appendix C: Letter of Consent, Workshop #1*



**Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Pursuing College**

\_\_\_\_\_, 2022

Re: Capstone Project for Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership: *Lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers: Navigating societal stigmas and barriers impeding their pathways to pursue higher education*

Dear Participant:

You have agreed to engage in a Pre-College Workshop Series, which includes in-person attendance to Workshop #1, on Saturday, \_\_\_\_\_, 2023, from 8.a.m until 5.p.m. An agenda will be provided in advance. Other mothers with incarceration experience have been invited to participate in this research by attending and engaging in Workshop #1.

Your participation is voluntary, and you are not being monetarily compensated for this participation in Workshop #1; however, breakfast and lunch will be served. Gift baskets and gift cards will be distributed at the end of the workshop.

Observations and recordings from the Workshop #1 may be included in a qualitative capstone study, defended to a committee in an open public forum to satisfy a doctorate degree requirement, and may be published. Your name and responses will remain confidential. You will be referenced and cited as you permit and approve in writing.

You may withdraw your consent at any time. Your participation is valued and appreciated.

Sincerely,

*Lesley Neff*

Lesley Neff  
Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership Student  
Marian University  
3200 Cold Spring Road  
Indianapolis, IN 46220

*Appendix D: Letter of Consent, Workshop #2 Debrief*



**Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Pursuing College**

\_\_\_\_\_, 2022

Re: Capstone Project for Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership: *Lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers: Navigating societal stigmas and barriers impeding their pathways to pursue higher education*

Dear Participant:

You have agreed to engage in a Pre-College Workshop Series, which includes Webex virtual attendance and participation in Workshop #2, on \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, 2023, from \_\_\_\_ until \_\_\_\_\_. This will be an opportunity to debrief on Workshop #1, and your feedback will be invited and encouraged. Questions will be provided in advance to prepare for discussion. Other mothers with incarceration experience who attended Workshop #1 have been invited to participate in the Workshop #2 debrief.

You are not being compensated for your participation in the Workshop #2 debrief via Webex, and your feedback and participation will be given voluntarily. The Webex will be recorded and transcribed for accuracy and will be used in a qualitative capstone study, defended to a committee in an open public forum to satisfy a doctorate degree requirement, and may be published (the final paper, not the Webex recording). Your name and feedback will remain confidential. You will be referenced and cited as you permit and approve in writing.

You may withdraw your consent at any time and may decline to answer any question posed in the Workshop #2 debrief that may make you uncomfortable. You may decline feedback at any time during the Workshop #2 debrief. Your willingness to participate is appreciated.

Sincerely,

*Lesley Neff*

Lesley Neff  
Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership Student  
Marian University  
3200 Cold Spring Road  
Indianapolis, IN 46220

*Appendix E: Letter of Consent, Interviews*



**Formerly Incarcerated Mothers Pursuing College**

\_\_\_\_\_, 2022

Re: Capstone Project for Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership: *Lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers: Navigating societal stigmas and barriers impeding their pathways to pursue higher education*

Dear Participant:

You have agreed to engage in a 60-minute interview, either via phone call or Webex, about how you experienced the Pre-College Workshop Series & how you received the Pre-College Portfolio. Other mothers with incarceration experience who attended Workshop #1 have been invited to participate in follow-up interviews. Attendance and participation in Workshop #1 are required for interview consideration.

Your interview will be recorded and transcribed for accuracy. You are not being compensated for this participation, and your participation is voluntary. The results of this interview and feedback provided will be used in a qualitative capstone study, defended to a committee in an open public forum to satisfy a doctorate degree requirement, and may be published (the final paper, not the interview recording or transcription). Your name and feedback will remain confidential. You will be referenced and cited as you permit and approve in writing.

You may withdraw your consent at any time and may decline to answer any question posed in the interview that may make you uncomfortable. Your participation is appreciated.

Sincerely,

*Lesley Neff*

Lesley Neff  
Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership Student  
Marian University  
3200 Cold Spring Road  
Indianapolis, IN 46220

## *Appendix F: Analysis of Chosen Intervention*



### *Selection of Intervention*

Before selecting the Marian's Pre-college Workshop Series and Pre-college Portfolio tool, several other interventions were considered:

- *Option #1:* Building a program which would run out of a non-traditional department at the university to encompass all service and support needs of formerly incarcerated mothers to clear their paths to college to include support for housing, transportation, career services, day care, financial literacy and counseling was considered. This would require too many other stakeholders, factions and forces at the organization. There is a low likelihood of the researcher being able to execute such a massive intervention in a short period of time. It would also be beyond the researcher's capacity to influence so many factions and stakeholders and could potentially jeopardize the researcher's authority at the organization and conflict with the status of another program initiative.
- *Option #2:* Developing a semester long pre-college course was an option. This would be ideal as it would allow for more time to develop a comfort level in the environment and build a stronger capacity to face feelings of shame and guilt enough to come back into the classroom. Course facilitators could walk the participants through all the processes and get them firmly established at the institution, and more relationships could be developed and grow over 16 weeks. This option was deselected because of logistical and financial barriers and time constraints. Many participants may have to travel 60+ miles to Indianapolis. They work full time jobs - many work multiple jobs, and it is anticipated that many participants will be single mothers. To take part in a 16-week class on campus

would be burdensome, even if delivered in a hybrid format, and many participants may be unable to complete the course and drop out at various points in the process. Even if the logistics could be worked out with the participants, there would be financial barriers; it would not be an affordable option in the budget to compensate the participants for food, gas and time for 16 weeks. A virtual option was considered, which could be possible for some meetings, but due to the adaptive nature and sensitive material, a face-to-face component seems important, at least early on.

- *Option #3: Developing workshops or training sessions for faculty and staff who work with non-traditional populations, specifically formerly incarcerated mothers, was considered. While this is needed and could perhaps, in future research and projects, be created as a prerequisite for faculty and staff who participate in the Marian University Pre-college Workshop Series, it veers away from the true adaptive challenge in this study which is to provide the women with a support service to help them build their own capacity and face the stigma and stereotypes head on; therefore, this option was deselected.*

Due to the potential political and financial barriers, the mindfulness of the adaptive leadership framework, and the time constraints of the first three options, the Marian Pre-college Workshop Series, with the Pre-college Portfolio tool, was selected as the intervention. This is the most reasonable ask of stakeholders and participants who are at maximum capacity and may be reluctant to dedicate too much volunteer time, especially without compensation, as most staff and faculty are at maximum capacity with work and family. This option has the most potential for making progress on an adaptive challenge with a focus on a distinct population of students for this study; however, the potential of this intervention is boundless in that a workshop series

like this can be adapted to appeal to other non-traditional student populations at Marian University.