Cultural Capital and Formerly Incarcerated Persons: A Case Study

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Abstract

The concept of a traditional college student in the United States is quickly disappearing as the demographic landscape of postsecondary education changes (Biddix & Gabourel, Forthcoming; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). One student group in particular—formerly incarcerated persons—are increasingly present on college campuses. This paper explores the journey of JJ (pseudonym) from incarceration to college student to understand the unique cultural capital formerly incarcerated students may possess, and how colleges can support these students. I used Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model as a framework for analysis. Three important findings emerged from the analysis: (1) previously incarcerated persons possess unique skills and cultural capital developed through their lived experiences, including incarceration; (2) previously incarcerated persons benefit from receiving specialized support often given to underrepresented students; (3) previously incarcerated persons may possess a unique drive to give back to the communities which they identify with. Recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are provided.

Keywords: incarceration, cultural capital, case study, community cultural wealth, inequity

Research on prisoners participating in postsecondary education programs while incarcerated is robust, and the consensus is clear: providing educational programming is a cost effective tool which will decrease recidivism and increase employment upon release (Davis et al., 2013; Bazos & Hausman, 2004; Fine et al., 2001; Borden, Richardson, & Meyer, 2012; Abrams & Franke, 2013). However, scholarly analysis of postsecondary educational attainment following incarceration, and its potential benefits, is limited. With more than 700,000 persons released from incarceration annually in the United States (Cuellar & Cheema, 2012), postsecondary education represents a valuable avenue of reentry for previously incarcerated persons. Current research shows that attending a postsecondary educational institution following incarceration decreases recidivism, increases earning potential, decreases a person’s willingness to
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reoffend, and increases social bonds (Halkovic et al, 2013; Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Runell, 2015; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013). This study further expands the literature to explore the unique cultural capital formerly incarcerated persons may possess and how institutions can best support these individuals as students.

This paper analyzes the experiences of one previously incarcerated person who attended a mid-sized public university in the Midwestern part of the United States. I conducted a case study based on the analysis of two 60 minute interviews, two observations, and document analysis to explore how JJ (pseudonym) transitioned from incarceration to postsecondary education. I used Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model as a framework for analysis, and specifically explored whether JJ developed valuable forms of cultural capital – aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital – during his unique life experiences. While JJ is only one person, the insights he provided to this analysis contribute to the argument that postsecondary institutions must recognize previously incarcerated persons as not only a group to be supported, but also as students who possess unique and valuable skills and benefit the campus community.

**Literature Review**

**History of Education as Rehabilitation**

Education as a form of rehabilitation is not a novel idea. It is estimated that 90 percent of state prisons and 100 percent of federal prisons in the United States offer some form of education to those incarcerated, with the majority being secondary education programs for obtaining a General Education Diploma (GED) (Harlow, 2003). Due to the large number of incarcerated persons who enter incarceration without a high school diploma or GED (58.7 percent), these programs have become vast in both state and federal prisons (Harlow, 2003). Yet, Tyler and Kling (2004) found minimal benefit to obtaining a GED while incarcerated, and found that many positive effects, such as job attainment, quality of living, and likelihood to reoffend, dissipate shortly after release. It is unclear why obtaining a GED while incarcerated has minimal positive effect; It may be that the stigma of being convicted of a crime outweigh obtaining a GED, or perhaps the worth of a secondary degree is falling as postsecondary degrees become more desired in the work force.

**Postsecondary Education in Prisons**

A large amount of evidence exists that obtaining a postsecondary education while incarcerated reduces recidivism while also increasing the financial earning potential of the inmate (Davis et al., 2013; Bazos & Hausman, 2004; Fine et al., 2001; Borden, Richardson, & Meyer, 2012; Abrams & Franke, 2013). Postsecondary education programs for incarcerated persons became more widely
practiced after the passing of The Higher Education Act of 1965. This act expanded social programs with the aim of making postsecondary education more accessible, and allowed for many prisoners to access Pell Grants while incarcerated (Higher Education Act, 1965; Ubah, 2004). In a study on offender rehabilitation through correction education, Ubah (2004) found that from 1965-1994, correctional educational programs in the United States vastly improved. With Pell Grants funding tuition for most prisoners, correctional education administrators had the financial flexibility to improve access to programs and the quality of the education, as well as broadening the types of degrees offered (Ubah, 2004).

In 2013, the United States Department of Justice Assistance collaborated with the RAND Corporation to conduct meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults (Davis et al., 2013). The implications of this study were clear; providing educational programming, specifically degree bearing postsecondary programs, is a cost-effective tool which will decrease recidivism and increase employment upon release (Davis et al., 2013). As a result of this study, the United States Department of Education and President Obama announced a Second Chance Pell Pilot Program in 2015. This program invited postsecondary institutions to participate in an experiment to determine the direction the United States should take in Pell Grant Funding and the education of prisoners (Castro et al., 2018).

Postsecondary Education and Reentry

Research examining the experiences of previously incarcerated persons attending a postsecondary education institution is growing, yet still limited. In a study on postsecondary engagement among formerly incarcerated male youth, Abrams and Franke (2013) found educational engagement to be limited in their sample. The authors found that non-fathers and individuals who held a GED or high school diploma were most likely to attend and complete a postsecondary education; the authors call for further research on the topic, with larger samples and qualitative inquiry (Abrams & Franke, 2013).

Runell (2015) utilized a life-course perspective to investigate the life histories of previously incarcerated persons currently attending a postsecondary institution. The participants all participated in Project Achieve, a program dedicated to postsecondary education as reentry in the Northeast United States (Runell, 2015). The author specifically examined “structural inclusions based on race, social class, and place that result in divergent access to and success in college courses for inmates as well as ex-offenders post-incarceration” (Runell, 2015, p. 8). Findings of the study revealed that while participants experienced racial biases and barriers to achievement related to their other identities (low-income, minority, first-generation, non-traditional adult), participating in the program provided them with hope for the future and “something that’s pulling you in the right
direction” (Runell, 2015, p. 148). Students participating in the program also benefitted from specialized tutoring, mentorship, and the formation of bonds with fellow students. Runell’s (2015) study highlights the positive implications to colleges and universities supporting programs which establish a prison to university pipeline, while also working to address other barriers these students may face.

College campuses may also benefit from admitting and supporting formerly incarcerated persons (Halkovic et al., 2013; Halkovic & Green, 2015). When postsecondary institutions admit previously incarcerated students, they are admitting students who have a desire to give back to society, possess intimate knowledge of criminal justice systems and policies, and are able to bridge communities often secluded from one another (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). Strayhorn, Johnson, and Barrett (2013) similarly found that formerly incarcerated Black men attending college used their status as an ex-offender as motivation and displayed a powerful resiliency despite their criminal history. Participants in their study often benefitted from supportive social networks of other college students with similar backgrounds (Strayhorn et al., 2013). Runell (2015), Halkovic and Greene (2015), and Stayhorn et al. (2013) called for further research exploring successful practices which support formerly incarcerated persons, as well as continued investigation of the specific strengths formerly incarcerated persons may possess; their work, as well as Yosso’s (2005) model of Community Cultural Wealth, guided the development of this study and the following research questions:

1. Do formerly incarcerated persons accumulate valuable cultural capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant) from their unique life experiences, including incarceration?

2. Can participating in existing college support services benefit both formerly incarcerated students and their campus community?

**Methods**

This qualitative case study analyzed one previously incarcerated person's experience attending a postsecondary education institution. Case study methodology explores a bounded case that represents a larger phenomenon and often utilizes multiple sources of data to best analyze that case (Yin, 2017). I used Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) as a framework for analysis, and specifically explored the evidence of the six forms of cultural capital in JJ’s narrative. The research questions which guided this case study were:

1. Do formerly incarcerated persons accumulate valuable cultural capital from their unique life experiences, including incarceration?

2. Can participating in existing college support services benefit both formerly incarcerated students and their campus community?
Data Collection

For this case study, I gathered data from two 60-minute interviews with JJ, conducted observations of several courses taught by JJ, and amassed documents provided by the federal TRIO program that JJ had participated in and subsequently worked for (Project Scholar). JJ identifies as a male, Black, Christian, and heterosexual individual who grew up in a middle-class family. JJ was incarcerated from the ages of 17 – 19, roughly two and a half years, for an undisclosed felony crime. During our conversations, I chose not to ask JJ about the crime he committed, and instead focused on his journey to and through college.

Data Analysis

The taped interview was transcribed into Microsoft Word by a trained transcriber. I coded the transcript by hand, initially reviewing JJ’s narrative for evidence of the six forms of capital defined by Yosso (2005). Sections of the transcript that I perceived to be evidence of JJ having unique capital were underlined and labeled (Merrian & Tisdell, 2015). Two themes which emerged from the literature review, specifically Halkovic & Greene’s work (2015), claimed that previously incarcerated persons may benefit from increased support and can also bring unique strengths to the campus which they attend. Accordingly, I conducted a secondary analysis of the data to explore if JJ did in fact benefit from participating in Project Scholar and whether he brought unique strengths to his campus community. I employed several reliability techniques including triangulation (multiple sources of data); member checks (participants review of the transcript); and peer debriefing (colleagues check analysis) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Yosso’s (2005) Model of Community Cultural Wealth serves as the theoretical framework for the analysis of the data for this case study. Yosso’s model challenges the traditional interpretations of Cultural Capital from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. Cultural capital, as originally conceptualized by Bourdieu (1984), is the accumulated skills, abilities, preferences, and social norms a person possesses due to their upbringing, social standing, or education. One criticism many have is that Bourdieu’s theory has been used to examine underrepresented persons from a deficit perspective (Luedke, Collom, McCoy, Lee-Johnson, & Winkle-Wagner, 2019). Yosso’s (2005) model was created to show the unique skills underrepresented persons may possess due to their unique upbringing and experiences. The model was conceptualized initially for underrepresented minority populations and has not been applied to previously incarcerated persons.
Yosso (2005) detailed six forms of cultural capital found among Communities of Color; aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain dreams of a better future, regardless of current socioeconomic status and perceived or actual barriers to achieving that future (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital is the communication abilities (e.g., bilingual, story-telling, art, poetry, music) one may acquire through the variety of experiences in communicating within their community (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital refers to the cultural values and information learned and practiced among families in Communities of Color (Yosso, 2005). Social capital is the networks and community resources shared within a Community of Color (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital is the skills learned and acquired by those who have been made to maneuver the various racially biased systems in the United States (Yosso, 2005). Lastly, resistant capital refers to the abilities learned when one must confront inequality as an everyday lived reality (Yosso, 2005). Yosso’s (2005) model has been used extensively in postsecondary education research since its conception (Gillborn, 2008; Milner, 2007; Wells, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). What made this particular theory valuable for this case study was that previously incarcerated persons represent communities which have often been observed from a deficit perspective. There is a limited amount of literature available which analyzes formerly incarcerated persons’ accumulation of Yosso’s (2005) cultural capital.

Findings

JJ’s narrative supported Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model by showing that JJ possessed unique skills and experiences due to his experience as not only a Person of Color, but also as a previously incarcerated person. Furthermore, JJ’s narrative revealed that he benefitted from participating in a first-year support program and was driven to give back to both the campus community and the Community of Color. I demonstrate the findings by providing JJ’s reflections on his lived experiences while incarcerated and attending postsecondary institutions. Pseudonyms are used for all identifying information, including names of persons, cities, universities, and programs.

Community Cultural Wealth

JJ was incarcerated from the age of 17 to 19. During his prison sentence, JJ earned a GED, then attended college after release. He has stayed free of contact with the criminal justice system since his incarceration experience. To do so, JJ successfully utilized his aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital.

Aspirational capital. Aspirational capital played a crucial role in JJ’s narrative. JJ came from a low to middle socioeconomic background and attended an urban public high school. Although JJ always believed himself to be intelligent and capable, many around him questioned his ability to succeed. While in high school,
JJ stated he “was always told that I would never amount to anything” by his teachers.

Following his incarceration, JJ had a similarly discouraging experience with an educator after his first semester of college:

She was a horrible advisor, instead of her going ‘let’s figure out something so you can succeed within pre-med,’ she was like ‘nah I think you should change your major.’ I mean at that point in time I was already feeling crappy because I had a poor GPA.

While JJ did change his major to psychology, he still dreams of someday being a doctor. He stated “it’s a struggle because I know I still want to become a medical doctor, and that will always be one of my aspirations, and who knows I might be 50 by the time I end up doing it.” Regardless of the barriers and doubts JJ has faced, he continues to believe in himself and his ability to achieve a better life.

**Linguistic capital.** JJ also utilized his linguistic capital to transition from incarceration to college. JJ shared with me how he would interact with older persons who were also incarcerated:

While I was incarcerated, I just seen so many older gentlemen in their 50s or 60s talking about how this was like their fourth time coming back and I was just like wow, I would never, ever, ever come back here ever again. And also being in there dealing with the older gentleman a lot of them didn’t know how to read or write. So they get letters from family members and I’m reading it to them and writing letters back to them. And I just thought that was like heartbreaking to see, you know, somebody who that’s probably spent the majority of their life locked up or incarcerated and they don’t know how to read or write.

While incarcerated, JJ had the unique experience of helping others read and write, while also viewing those individuals in a mentor type role. JJ pointed out how many of the older gentleman told him “you’re too smart to be here, you’re not like the rest of them.”

JJ used his linguistic capital accumulated while incarcerated when he transitioned into a role as mentor and tutor for Project Scholar and coordinator of the African American mentorship group. During an observation of a course JJ was teaching to freshman participating in Project Scholar, JJ showed how his linguistic capital benefitted his campus community. He spoke to a class of mostly Black students, holding each of their attention as he told his inspirational story. Much of what he told those students emulated his experiences communicating with older individuals during incarceration. JJ used the linguistic capital developed during his time incarcerated to improve his community and uplift other students.
Familial capital. JJ’s familial capital played a crucial role in his ability to be successful following incarceration. JJ detailed how his incarceration led to an improved relationship with his mother, who then pushed him to attend college:

I think the best thing I ever did was get locked up, cause my mom kicked her drug habit and drinking habit. She realized she needed to make a change. Not only for me, but also for herself. [Following incarceration] I worked part-time for my mom. Until one day she just fired me…she just looked at me and she was like ‘working there, I don’t see you working there for the rest of your life.’ She gave me the choice, ‘either I can buy your school clothes, or I can pay your cell phone bill.’

JJ’s mother valued education, so much so that she fired him in order to push him to attend college. Following being fired by his mother, JJ applied to and was accepted by several large Midwest universities.

Social capital. Social Capital also factored into JJ’s success. He shared with me an experience he had while spending time in a half-way house:

One day a guy came in, nice suit, nice tie, nice everything, and he walked up to this whiteboard they had and he wrote his prison number up on the board. And then he said ‘now I’m a Dr.’ And he was talking about how coming from inner cities and knowing what we know, mental health is never an issue to African Americans, you know, until it’s too late. And we can change everything now. From that day forward, I just knew that I wanted to be something more than just a prison number. So, after that the sky was the limit.

Developing social capital by interacting with inspirational persons while incarcerated introduced JJ to valuable resources, such as a high school diploma equivalency program, work opportunities, and networks of others committed to improving their lives.

Navigational capital. It is important to be cognizant of the fact that many systems in our society have been built based on a foundation of oppressive beliefs, especially within educational institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In order to successfully maneuver himself through the criminal justice system and into higher education, JJ utilized his navigational capital. JJ shared how his career may be impacted by inequality:

I can’t see myself doing counseling for too long. Health care in America right now is a big issue, and people definitely in a lower socioeconomic standing are not getting health care, how are they going to be able to get some type of mental health?

JJ was aware of the potential for his career to falter due to inequality in the healthcare system and his felony conviction. He shared how he learned from others in prison how “difficult it would be to get a good job when he got out,” and
that it was important to always have options. His foresight showed that he has accumulated navigational capital through his experiences and used it to consider situations he may encounter in the future.

**Resistant capital.** JJ demonstrated that he had accumulated resistant capital when explaining his plan if a career in counseling did not work for him:

> I started off in IT. I used to build computers for fun and sell them to people in church. I definitely want to get back into something like that. I’m always looking for new avenues to kind of make sure that I’m alright in the long run. This summer I’m restarting my mom’s cleaning business. I told her we’ll restart it, just get back at it and see if it’ll thrive or not.

Through incarceration, being told he would amount to nothing, and almost failing out of school his first semester, JJ continued to demonstrate resistant capital. By starting a business with his mother as a backup plan, succeeding in psychology after feeling disenfranchised by his interactions with an advisor, and becoming a mentor and teacher to others despite his past incarceration, JJ exemplifies the abilities learned because of inequalities present in his everyday life.

**Participation in Project Scholar**

JJ benefitted from participating in the first-year support program for underrepresented students. Although JJ possessed valuable forms of cultural capital, his status as a previously incarcerated person and underrepresented individual presented barriers to succeeding at a four-year public institution. He struggled with the transition from incarceration to community college (Technical University) and then to a public four-year postsecondary institution (Mid-State College). JJ explained his initial struggles with academics at a larger college:

> Technical University is very different from Mid-State College. There’s not parties, there’s no distractions. But here at Mid-State I always had this vision of being like the movies. The problem was I didn’t understand a lot of the things inside the classroom. I’m sure a lot of these kids learn about d2l [an online class platform] during their freshman year and I came in as a transfer student with credits so where I was beyond, you know, like hey log me into d2l and this is where your assignments and stuff be at. So I just read the book and I kind of just forgot about the assignments that was on d2l.

Much of JJ’s struggle stemmed from his status as a non-traditional student and the institutions failure to adequately support him initially. Incoming traditional students often go through extended orientation programs and first-year seminar classes. Like many non-traditional students, JJ gained his unique cultural capital through alternative life experiences (Yosso, 2005). However, his skillset did not initially match the capital which is valued in postsecondary education, an
institution which often values the capital commonly held by the dominant social class (Harper, 2015).

After his first semester, JJ had a 1.7 grade point average and had failed his required math course. Policy at Mid-State College mandated he speak to an advisor, and since he was an underrepresented student he was sent to the Office of Multicultural Affairs:

That’s when I met Dr. Kameron and Tina Smith because, of course you had to appeal to get back into school, and I had failed math. I was telling Tina Smith at that point in time, and she taught math, and I was telling her I know I’m not stupid I can do this stuff. She ends up telling me to take her class the following semester which I did, and from there the sky was the limit you know. That’s when she introduced me to Project Scholar.

Project Scholar was a program designed for first-year students, while JJ was a second-year student when he enrolled. Dr. Kameron and Tina Smith knew about JJ’s status as a previously incarcerated person, and allowed him to participate in the program as a non-traditional student.

JJ shared how participating in Project Scholar helped JJ succeed at Mid-State by not only teaching him new skills and abilities, but by also emphasizing the strengths he already possessed:

I would say that Project Scholar has taught me how to technically survive college. One thing I got to say about Dr. Kameron is that, and also with Tina, they both took the time out to kind of sat me down, tell me what I should or what I need to improve on. It gave me the sense of understanding how to make connections, how to go really get what you want. How to be more vocal about the things that you need. Because a lot of students don’t understand that you need to assert your needs. It also taught me how to trust my abilities, you know a lot of time we don’t know our own true abilities until they are tested.

Participating in Project Scholar enabled JJ to trust his own abilities, while also teaching him valuable information on how to be successful in college. JJ also benefitted from the mentor/mentee relationship he developed with Dr. Kameron and Tina Smith, both of whom took a special interest in his success at Mid-State College. JJ continued with Project Scholar, stating “I don’t think I ever got below a 2.7 after that.”

Giving Back

JJ’s shared that he was determined to give back to both the campus community of Mid-State College and to his Community of Color. After completing Project Scholar, JJ participated in the McNair Scholars TRIO program. He described how his research would help other Black students:
My research I did was the effects of labeling and the understanding of why African American students change their majors from the natural sciences to the social sciences. Basically, the effects of major changing within the African American population here at Mid-State, because at that point in time I wasn’t the only one that was changing from pre-med, chemistry, biology, and so forth to a social science. So why are they not able to make it and they coming over to social work, counseling, psychology? And I know they were busting their butt because I was studying with them. So, I was just trying to understand why.

JJ experienced racial bias when he tried to major in biology with the goal of attending medical school. He had an advisor who made him feel like he was unable to obtain his desired degree. JJ strived to make the campus community better through research for students who were in a similar situation.

After completing Project Scholar, JJ continued to manifest his desire to help his campus community as well as his Community of Color by becoming a mentor for Black men on campus, teaching for Project Scholar, and pursuing a graduate degree in counseling. He hopes to one day become a motivational speaker for young men who are incarcerated, and stated:

“I feel like I have a story to tell and I’m able to inspire kids, you know. I just want to be happy and to actually be able to touch lives, that’s my goal.”

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Analysis of JJ’s narrative revealed three important findings which can be utilized to further support previously incarcerated persons attending postsecondary institutions: (1) previously incarcerated persons may possess unique cultural capital (aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital) developed through their lived experiences, including incarceration; (2) previously incarcerated persons may benefit from receiving specialized support often given to underrepresented students; and (3) previously incarcerated persons may possess a unique drive to give back to the communities which they identify. Based on these findings, I provided recommendations for postsecondary institutions and educators.

The first finding revealed that the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005) can be applied to previously incarcerated persons. This model has been applied extensively to underrepresented students (Gillborn, 2008; Milner, 2007; Wells, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), yet this study is the first to observe it among previously incarcerated persons. Educators and administrators at postsecondary institutions must utilize this new information to change the way applicants and incoming students with an incarceration history are viewed.
Rampey et al. (2016) found that incarcerated persons in the United States fall well below the U.S. household average for literacy score, numeracy score, and work experience. Furthermore, incarcerated and previously incarcerated persons often come from geographic areas with underachieving secondary education and populations residing in low socioeconomic standings (Harlow, 2003). Institutions may mistakenly view previously incarcerated offenders as unqualified or underserving of admission. This deficit perspective is unfortunately often applied to traditionally underrepresented students who enter postsecondary education. The deficit perspective may be applied two-fold to individuals who are both formerly incarcerated and identify as a traditionally underrepresented student group. Indeed, 66 percent of postsecondary institutions collect criminal history from their applicants (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

This study revealed that previously incarcerated persons may in fact possess unique skills and cultural capital, and when these skills are emphasized by postsecondary education institutions it can lead to improved success for these students. The higher education system was built on the foundation of inequality and valuing attributes prevalent in the dominant class, in the case of the United States White middle to upper class persons. Yet, the findings of this study indicate that the cultural capital accumulated through incarceration may yield value on a college campus. Educators and administrators who make admission decisions must use this knowledge when considering the applications of previously incarcerated persons. Admissions decisions should be made based on a holistic review of applications informed by Yosso’s (2005) model and other culturally relevant theories which focus on unique strengths and avoid the deficit perspective.

From a policy standpoint, the findings of this study support the numerous ban the box initiatives across the country. States such as Louisiana have moved to eliminate reviewing the criminal history of applicants for non-sexual offenses. Yet, many policymakers still remain apprehensive about removing criminal history from college admission applications. With college admissions falling across the country, policies which require applicants to identify themselves as justice involved are counterintuitive.

The second finding concerns the potential benefit to a previously incarcerated individual of specialized support. Research shows that underrepresented student populations (Students of Color, veterans, adult students) often benefit from programs specifically designed to increasing their success in college (Luedke et al., 2019; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). There are programs which specifically serve previously incarcerated individuals in the United States, such as the New Jersey STEP Mountainview Community and Project Rebound of California. Studies show that these programs are effective at supporting previously incarcerated students through building a community, providing academic assistance, and creating safe spaces (Runell, 2015). Yet, securing funding to initiate and staff such a program may prove to be difficult for postsecondary
institutions. JJ was fortunate to be admitted to a program for first-year students and would have struggled to persist if he had not been admitted to the program. The administrators of the program intentionally pushed JJ to enroll because they recognized his unique skills and ability to succeed. Programs such as Project Scholar in the United States must broaden their reach to include previously incarcerated students.

The third finding affirmed the research done by Halkovic et al. (2013); previously incarcerated students benefit the campus community. In Halkovic et al.’s (2013) study, the authors found that previously incarcerated students brought unique abilities to the campus which they attended; the desire to learn, the drive to excel, and the experience of marginalization. This study found that JJ sought to give back to both the campus community and his Community of Color by participating in research aimed at improving the experience of Persons of Color on his campus, being a mentor to other Black males, working for Project Scholar and teaching within the program, and his desire to work in a field where he can bring awareness to mental health in Black communities. JJ’s positive impact on his campus was likely felt by countless students. By admitting and supporting previously incarcerated students, other postsecondary institutions can also benefit their campus community.

Conclusion

This case study analyzed the experiences of one previously incarcerated person attending a medium sized public four-year postsecondary institution in the Midwest. JJ’s experiences may not be representative of all previously incarcerated students. Research using a similar framework on a larger sample across various states is needed to further explore if previously incarcerated persons possess unique forms of capital, and how the Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) model can be used to support previously incarcerated students. While this case study showed that JJ was successful during his time at a postsecondary education institution, longitudinal analysis is needed to explore the long-term effects of previously incarcerated persons attending a postsecondary education institution.

Practical applications revealed by the findings of this study can inform policymakers and campus administrators. The findings of this study highlight the need for policymakers and justice reform advocates to continue the discussion of increasing access to higher education for justice-involved and formerly incarcerated persons (see U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Furthermore, admissions decisions should be made based on a holistic review of applications informed by Yosso’s (2005) model and other culturally relevant theories which focus on unique strengths and avoid the deficit perspective. While JJ is only one person, the insights he provided to this analysis contribute to the argument that postsecondary institutions must recognize previously incarcerated persons as not
only a group to be supported, but also as students who possess unique and valuable skills which benefit the campus community.

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