

# Conquering Barriers: How formerly incarcerated Black men define & achieve success in higher education

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"...I think maybe they can even have a board or a group that kind of sits with special cases where somebody has gotten out, and they're trying to change their life, and they can sit and talk to these people who listen to them and ask the necessary questions. You have to find out what's going on in a person's life and support that person as they go through the educational process. There should be a team where a person could find a resource person. If you have problems with your classes, finances, food, transportation, you talk to these people."

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This grounded theory study applied both critical race theory and anti-deficit frameworks to recognize the systemic barriers that are in place that limit the success of formerly incarcerated Black students and challenge anti-deficit perspectives that fault those affected by oppressive systems rather than the systems themselves. This qualitative design used open-ended semi-structured interviews to learn how formerly incarcerated Black men defined and achieved postsecondary academic success. Participants described success in relation to goal achievement and discussed that internal motivation to reach their goals was one of two essential criteria for being academically successful. The other criterion for their success is having support to overcome unique challenges related to being formerly incarcerated. Recommendations from this study include urging campuses to consider education as a human right and providing access and support for formerly incarcerated students as both a societal obligation to open opportunities for formerly incarcerated people and a responsibility to welcome diverse populations to their campuses. *Keywords:* qualitative, formerly incarcerated, higher education, success, grounded theory.

## INTRODUCTION

This research is significant for social justice and student development interests across higher education. From a social justice perspective, earning an advanced degree centers higher education as a pathway to upward social mobility, including increased job opportunities and earning

comes from either a deficit perspective, which associates adverse outcomes with cultural stereotypes (Bensimon, 2005), or a focus on criminal history (Strayhorn et al., 2013). This research is also significant to student affairs professionals who can learn how formerly incarcerated Black men define and achieve postsecondary success to support this success structurally and intentionally.

## METHODS

This study used qualitative, grounded theory methodology to learn about formerly incarcerated Black male students' success in higher education. It was designed based on the conceptual perspectives of critical race theory and anti-deficit frameworks. The primary data collection method was semi-structured, open-ended intensive interviews to learn about formerly incarcerated Black men's experiences and how they defined and achieved success.

The Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory (figure below) is a developing theory focusing on support as an essential component of how formerly incarcerated students achieve success. Participants defined success by discussing markers of success, which indicated progression toward, or accomplishment of, a goal. It was apparent from participant interviews that goals and motivation were linked, as success was not attainable without a goal to strive for and the motivation to achieve it. Further development of this theory brought attention to the difference between internal and external factors that affect a student's success. Another

critical point is that while participants could internally set their goals and identify their motivation for pursuing and accomplishing them, they needed external support to help them conquer the barriers they faced. While there may be some impact from others who were motivational role models and supportive of participants reaching their goals, the participant internally defined the primary component of having a goal and the motivation to achieve the academic goal. On campus, the support needed to help students be successful may have come from similar sources, such as faculty and staff or community reentry groups. However, participants explained that it was always by happenstance and that the support offered was random and lucky. Each participant's experience was unique and based on the chance of finding the right help at the right time, which helped them succeed academically.

Participant goals and motivation centered around post-release success, positive educational experiences, and feelings of healing and validation related to feeling stigmatized by incarceration and related judgment. Participants in this study confirmed that validating experiences helped mitigate feelings of stigma. Participants discussed feeling different and recognizing nonincarcerated students in the classroom as normal. For example, one participant saw success upon release and attending college as the opportunity to interact with “normal” people, including other students and the professionals on campus. One participant refers to “the scarlet letter” when discussing challenges with college admission. Students also reported feeling normal around other students who were similarly focused and motivated when they earned high grades.

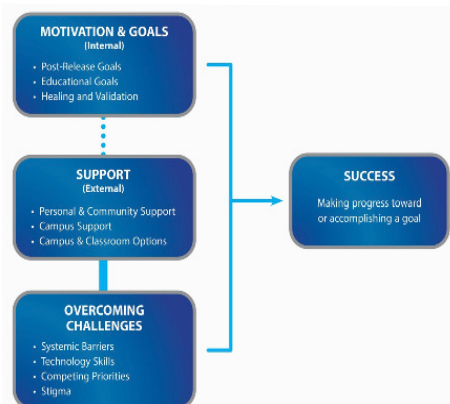


Figure: Formerly Incarcerated Student Success Theory

Participants were likely to succeed with a variety of support to overcome challenges related to incarceration. Common challenges, such as transition to college, financial concerns, challenges of first-generation students, lack of family support, and competing obligations, affect students' development and success in college. What is unique for formerly incarcerated students is that due to incarceration, these challenges happen all at once. In contrast, for a student who has not been incarcerated, challenges often come sequentially or are expected and addressed with typical preparation for college. Supports commonly in place during known transition points, such as preparation for college through high school coursework or beginning a college career with a peer group, were absent or ill-timed. For example, most formerly incarcerated adult-age students were learning technology that other students had grown used to long before attending college while also adjusting to a vastly changed technological world that had evolved without them during their incarceration, and they required additional support.

According to the participants, both campus and community support were necessary. Campus support, such as that provided by faculty, staff, and campus offices, was inconsistently offered, and often, as reflected by participants, it was luck that landed them in a place with the right person at the right time with the right information who was able to help them overcome a challenge to their success. Other campus support that helped students succeed included being in diverse classrooms with people of varying ages and life experiences and those who had not been incarcerated. This diversity helped participants feel valued for the unique experiences they contribute to the classroom. Lastly, it was important for participants to have campus mentorship and guidance from offices, faculty, and staff

"I wanna get my life back on track. Education is the best way to do so, but there's still a lot of adjusting that has to be done in life first."

for successful educational experiences. Community and personal support included support from family and friends and reintegration support to bridge the gap between prison and campus so that they could be successful. Understanding that mentorship is a crucial component of support, formerly incarcerated students who persist and graduate can, in turn, mentor others toward success.

Participants described feeling validated by talking about their success. They commented that it was helpful to discuss their achievements in the otherwise negative experience of incarceration, and it was important for them to discuss these successes with others to remember how far they had come from being incarcerated by working toward their academic goals.

## CONCLUSIONS

Participants were successful because of their determination and the happenstance of finding support to overcome the barriers they faced. Each participant navigates motivation and goals internally. Support from personal and community connections may help participants' motivation and goal progress, but this external support is not required. However, to overcome challenges, students must receive on-campus support to conquer these barriers. Therefore, intentional, specialized support is key to formerly incarcerated students' success.

## RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications of this study include recommendations for campuses and communities based on this research and emerging theory by urging campus leaders to consider higher education a human right, value the diversity of formerly incarcerated students who add a wide range of experiences and knowledge within the classroom, and actively seek to prepare these students to overcome the disparities of job opportunity and placement in careers requiring college-level degrees, but which prohibit access due to criminal history. Campuses should see their role in participating in and correcting the systemic hurdles for all underserved and underrepresented students, specifically those who have been formerly incarcerated, and provide intentional support for their unique academic and non-academic needs.

Based on participant recommendations, campuses should provide an office staffed with a blend of personnel and students who have been incarcerated, who are keenly familiar with the experiences of incarceration, and who have insight into navigating higher education to provide transitional support for this student group for success on-campus and related reentry needs off campus. Providing this source of mentorship to support formerly incarcerated students should include increasing financial literacy, learning technology, and navigating resources that would address common issues such as navigating systemic barriers, competing priorities, and stigma.

Communities should consider the value of education as a method for reducing recidivism and increasing public safety and stability. The more educated a formerly incarcerated person is, the less likely they are to recidivate (Truesdale-Moore & Lewis, 2023), creating a stronger, safer community and more prosperous community member. Success on campus and in the classroom benefits students and the community.

“Being in the classroom was very restorative. It was healing to connect with people other than with drugs and alcohol.”

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