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The Importance of Lived Experience in Improving Higher Education in Prison: Insights from a Community Advisory Board

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Abstract

Since the recent expansion of higher education in prison (HEP) programs, correctional systems and universities have been working to optimize these programs to yield maximum impact. Collaborating with individuals with lived experience of incarceration and participation in higher education could provide valuable insights toward improving these programs. This paper reports on a community advisory board (CAB) of formerly incarcerated people, which set out to share ideas on improving higher education in prison based on their personal and shared experiences. These experiences and suggestions were grouped into themes outlined in this paper and accompanied by quotes from CAB members. Members described non-existent or negative relationships with schooling before incarceration. This lack of conversation, culture, or infrastructure for education continued into incarceration, though they recognized that school might have provided better opportunities for students and their families upon release. The board suggested that introducing a trusted, formerly incarcerated peer could help combat negative experiences with school, transition students into learning, and help them build the

momentum to be self-sustaining in HEP. The novel insights generated by this CAB reflect the value of integrating lived experience in decision-making regarding HEP programs.

Keywords: postsecondary education, incarceration, directly impacted, peer support, community engagement, reentry, system-impacted, collaboration, reform

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Introduction

There are currently more than 400 higher education programs in prisons nationally, with at least one program in each state (National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs, 2023). Studies have shown that enrollment in HEP is inversely related to recidivism (the higher the degree, the lower the rate), makes prisons safer, and saves costs (Austin, 2017; Elfman, 2024; Antenangeli & Durose, 2021; Karpowitz, Kenner, & B.P.I., 1995). McCorkel & DeFina (2019) articulate that "higher education in prison [also] prioritizes the broader needs and interests of its students as opposed to the narrow interests of the market by enhancing knowledge of self and community, strengthening social bonds and collective efficacy, enabling critical analysis of social structures and conditions, and igniting creative potential" (p. 4).

Although HEP programs are generally motivated by a desire to improve the lives of those who are incarcerated (Castro & Gould, 2018), currently or formerly incarcerated individuals are rarely involved in decision-making. Instead, in many cases, university and prison administrators and educators guide HEP programs, policies, and processes. While these individuals may provide critical knowledge and skills in instruction, education, security, project management, and the carceral system, they may have different perspectives and priorities than those directly impacted.

One venue for impacted individuals to affect change in how HEP programs are constructed and implemented is scholarly literature (e.g., Arroyo, Diaz, & McDowell, 2019; Davis III, 2018; Evans, 2018; Fine et al., 2001). While the metric for the efficacy of HEP programs is primarily recidivism, studies involving formerly incarcerated individuals have proposed more strengths-based outcomes, such as self-efficacy and belonging (Baranger, Rousseau, Mastrorilli, & Matesanz, 2018; Binda, Weinberg, Maetzener, & Rubin, 2020).

To advance the burgeoning literature centering the voices of those with lived experience related to incarceration and higher education, we present insights from a community advisory board (CAB) convened to provide input for a higher education in prison program by addressing two broad questions:

1. What are the experiences of higher education in prison as stated by individuals with lived experience?
2. What are suggestions to improve higher education in prison as stated by individuals with lived experience?

This project adds to the breadth of shared, lived experiences within the education and incarceration literature and provides suggestions to improve higher education in prison based on those experiences. In doing so, we as authors (both the CAB and the university researchers) present an argument that peer-to-peer engagement could substantially enhance the success of HEP programs.

Methods

An HEP Community Advisory Board

In association with a relatively new HEP program at a large midwestern university, we convened a CAB of seven members (Authors 3-9) with lived experience from the local community facilitated by three university researchers (Shankoff, Carlson, & Stuetzle, 2023).

The university researchers reached out to individuals with lived experience of incarceration as well as some experience with higher education – whether it be before, during, or after incarceration. Additionally, individuals were selected for their record of community engagement in criminal legal reform and reentry. As described by the CAB members, they had all "[gone] through something. You take the time to study it, understand it, and reach a place where you can teach it and articulate it – that's what makes an expert" (M11)[1]. This experience was critical as it allowed CAB members to provide detailed suggestions grounded in their own lives as to how the program can improve to better serve its students. The CAB included members with multiple different genders, races, and ethnicities.

To be clear, the CAB was not convened primarily for the purpose of research or generating a paper. The primary goal was to obtain advice from directly-impacted individuals on how to improve the HEP program. As such, the IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations. The questions explored in this work emerged from the experiences of the group (CAB members and researchers) over the course of a year spent working together.

Data Collection

The CAB met once a month over a year for one-and-a-half hours per meeting. Meetings were held off-campus at a university-community partnership location. CAB members were paid $75 per hour. With the permission of everyone present, all meetings were audio recorded. We recorded 12 meetings for a total of approximately 18 hours. Automated transcriptions were produced using NVivo and revised by the research team.

Data Analysis

[1] For confidentiality and anonymity, identifying information will not be included in this paper's quotes. Quotes will be distinguished by the meeting (M) number (e.g., M1, M8).

We chose to segment the transcript according to utterances. We define an utterance as any string of words one participant speaks without interruption from another participant. This unit of analysis ranged from one word to many paragraphs of text.

Once the transcript was segmented, the research team engaged in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The first two authors began by meeting to openly code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) one transcript together. Summaries were created for each utterance that described either an experience or suggestion from board members. Summaries were intended to have as little inference as possible. Researcher utterances were not included. The result of this phase of analysis was a total of 559 utterance summaries.

Following joint open coding, the first author created summaries for half of the remaining transcripts. From those summaries, she engaged in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where she looked across all the summaries and identified patterns. From these patterns, she identified broad categories of both experiences and suggestions provided by the advisory board. The result of her axial coding was a codebook of utterance summaries organized into eight themes.

At this point in the analysis, the first author was confident she had reached saturation and was no longer identifying new themes. The second author then applied the codebook to the remaining data using the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965). She consulted the first author for clarification whenever she had questions about the codebook or a particular utterance. Her coding confirmed data saturation. Finally, the first author took all utterances coded by the second author and added them to the codebook under the appropriate theme. Before moving forward, these themes were brought to the CAB for review and approval.

In the final stage of analysis, the first five authors met to discuss the themes in the codebook and their associated utterances. These authors then selected a theme and used coded utterances that richly, but not extremely, demonstrated that theme. Those utterances, contextualized with their personal experiences, were then woven into a narrative about each theme. We[2] present the narratives and perspectives of our CAB members with lived experience of incarceration below.

[2] This work is a collaboration between community activists with lived experience and university researchers without lived experience. In this paper, "we" refers to all authors. We refer to our CAB members with lived experience as the "CAB" and researchers without lived experience as "researcher." To reduce misinterpretation of data, system-impacted writers and readers were provided with the codebook, invited to write, and reviewed the narratives below. Each of the sections below may take on a different "voice" as it was written by different members of the CAB. Rather than "smoothing over" these textual differences, we leave them here to elevate the voices of each author. CAB members were invited to write in the third person, but also chose to use the second person point of view when they wanted to call upon the reader.

Results

Data analysis resulted in eight main themes that cut across both experiences and suggestions of the CAB. The first three focus on the educational history of system-impacted individuals before, during, and after incarceration. The fourth discusses the experiences of CAB members working with other entities to make change. The remaining themes discuss the CAB's idea of utilizing directly impacted peers to support HEP.

1. **Education before incarceration** was not a priority for several reasons, including repeated trauma, lack of support at school or home, and constant displacement.
2. Efforts to enroll in higher **education during incarceration** were met with prison/security barriers and individual/personal barriers.
3. Returning to or **continuing education** was one of the ways CAB members felt they could provide for their families and achieve financial stability.
4. **Collaborating with relevant entities** (e.g., DOC, HEP facilitators, and researchers) can be difficult but is important for success.
5. While **prison intake facilities** are highly restrictive, they are also ideal for planting seeds about education and reentry.
6. Peer support values trust and **relationship building** over providing resources alone.
7. **Peer facilitators** seek to understand barriers to entry and how to change relationships with schools from negative to positive ones.
8. Building **an agenda for peer support** with input from people with lived experience is vital for motivating individuals uncertain about participating in education during incarceration and providing continued support for those already interested.

Education Before Incarceration

In early meetings, the CAB shared instances of their personal and educational history before incarceration, which would mold their beliefs about continuing school during or after prison. It was repeatedly mentioned that school was not part of the equation for the lives the CAB members led – which tended to focus on survival.

> There's not a culture about education, so we don't see it through that lens. And so, when I don't come from that – I'm coming from pistol playing, selling dope – you talking about education? So, like, it's almost like you almost have to transfer over… to that kind of mindset because we're not coming from that. (M1)

Higher education was never discussed in the home and not prioritized in settings with friends and family for various reasons including, but not limited to, generational trauma and institutional biases.

> Was school ever important? It wasn't. There was no value to school. Nobody in my family, my immediate circle, had ever graduated high school. Nobody going to college…

> I'm getting A's and B's, but I'm skipping… But nobody had ever showed any interest [in or supported] me… There was nothing in my immediate community or in my environment that said, 'This would be a benefit.' What is college? (M3)

The repeated trauma endured during childhood and in school included physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, creating many roadblocks in the form of low self-worth, low self-esteem, distrust in people and systems, and addiction, which led to disengagement and disinterest in education. The lack of support in and for school, family financial instability, and the unstable home environment caused constant displacement, which led to school becoming less of a priority, falling behind in classes, and grades suffering.

> And that was when there was trauma and stuff happening… and then I just stopped caring. I didn't have any worth. I didn't have any self-esteem. So, I think that played a big part in it and then moving forward into the higher education. It took me a while to build up… I couldn't see myself in those places… But once I started going and started getting the grades and seeing that, 'Oh, I can do this,' then that's where my momentum picked up. But I think that trauma played a big part in dictating my place in education. (M3)

> The trauma, the worth… that just beats you down, you know, especially when it's repeated over and over… I think that that was an internal thing. I withdrew myself… I just disconnected from everything and just basically went through the motions. (M3)

All these negative experiences, thoughts, and feelings would lead some to act out in school and receive disciplinary action. Educators seemed more focused on behaviors than effective teaching. Some were never truly taught how to effectively learn or study, while others were explicitly told that they weren't going to amount to anything – so why try? Others felt that they were good in school and loved the experience, but they were also ostracized for being smart both at home and at school.

> I really liked school growing up. At a certain point, life started changing at home… it came to a point where… I was constantly switching schools. Things that were going on in the household that we can't talk about outside. By the time I was 15, I was on my own. Like, living as an adult on my own. So that whole education process, like there were parts… that [were] supportive, but I wasn't there long enough for it to help anything… At that time, I think school was a safer place… But then it just got to the point where I didn't… catch things like I did before. I wasn't good at them anymore. So, I didn't want to be there because I felt stupid… Some of the teachers in certain schools were just… not supportive. [Saying things] like, 'You should know this by now.' (M3)

The stories about the challenges of staying in school seemed to have a similar thread: They highlighted insecurities and fear. For many, school often felt like punishment because their fear was met with rebuke—the same rebuke that continued into incarceration.

Education During Incarceration

Internal Barriers

Many CAB members had internal narratives that prevented them from pursuing HEP. Seeking an education in prison walls may have seemed obvious to some at first, but it took a complete internal paradigm shift for others to recognize they deserved something better. A difficult history with education before incarceration, being reduced to a number, and being counted like chattel during prison had a significant impact. Education felt insurmountable when that counting was combined with a mindset saying it was deserved.

Some did not think education was possible for them; some didn't feel accepted; some were not ready for change or didn't recognize their intelligence; some felt unworthy; some lacked confidence; some did not have the attitude for school; some did not desire more for themselves, nor did they want to 'move differently'. For some, it was embarrassing to show they were struggling or did not understand. For others, it was embarrassment about schooling so late in life. Getting things wrong made some feel discouraged and want to give up.

> I felt stupid to say certain things. It just didn't work for me. Now I am in this place and whenever I do get the urge to try and attempt and I get shot down, like, I know it isn't for me. Because if someone don't got their GED at this point in their life, that's embarrassing. (M7)

They were not sure they could do it, nor did they believe they could ask for help. Some were still too angry to think about school or were not thinking of school at all. They were guarding themselves in an extremely oppressive space with very little trust. Far too many faced that challenge to overcome, and some have failed to reach the peak of the mountain. It did not have to be that way.

Institutional Barriers

Even when people reached the point of wanting to better themselves, the prison created walls in the form of biases and bureaucracies. Those walls proved too high for some to climb.

The CAB members report that education in prison appeared secondary to security. In their experience, upon first arriving, people quickly realized that there were no clear incentives to enter, complete, or even think about education in prison. The noisy units were not environments conducive to studying, and materials could be taken away for security reasons. Officers commented that HEP students received free education while they or their children paid for theirs.

The CAB members also described their experiences with prisons offering limited programming. Of the few classes and seats offered within each class, the number of criteria and restrictions for classes seemed endless and confusing. You needed to complete prerequisites no one told you

about; you had to refrain from getting conduct reports for a certain amount of time; you had too much time left in your sentence; you had too *little* time left in your sentence; some criteria were on paper, and some were a judgment call. Some people were *more* eligible for seemingly arbitrary reasons and skipped the waitlist. Some interested in schooling were unaware of eligibility criteria altogether and would get in trouble for "harassing" education staff with questions. At times, no matter how eager and determined you were to "do your time right," get into school, and prepare for reentry, you were put on the waitlist, or you were rejected. It's difficult to keep trying when so many things are working against you or telling you you are not good enough.

> I did eight years and … I didn't want to leave with nothing… Because a lot of people want it. They just can't access it. I mean, there's probably people that don't, but I know a lot that wanted it and couldn't get it. (M1)

Instructors had biases about incarcerated individuals, which when left unattended, led to a misunderstanding of passion for aggression.

> There's a cultural, you know, disproportionality to the responses in those situations. Especially the way you raise your voice, if you use your hands, any of that type of stuff, people immediately get to talkin' 'bout, you know, you being aggressive. That's specifically for black men. (M4)

By recognizing and actively working to dismantle systemic biases, the CAB members suggested that we can begin to level the playing field and ensure that all individuals, regardless of race or background, have equal access to opportunities for education and rehabilitation.

> Why wouldn't you want them to focus their time on doing something that's going to be positive and going to help them grow as a person in a positive way? Forget the time frame, forget where they're released to, wherever they released to if they ever release. Wouldn't you want them to be releasing in a better way? (M2)

School reduces recidivism, builds confidence, and encourages self-transformation. When ready, some people want to be more than their crime. They want to change and rebuild themselves. School taught that some behaviors were related to context rather than the individual. Learning about important historical figures who persevered through difficult times was relevant, inspiring, and eye-opening. Critical thinking was encouraged.

Educational staff should try to understand the psychological characteristics of people who are marginalized and living within an oppressive environment. Learning new things can be difficult and people will make mistakes that can be discouraging, but teachers can show students that failures can become life lessons. There should be no expectation for people to reintegrate into a schooling culture seamlessly after years without it. Programs should recognize that people learn differently. Prison education should be able to recognize and accommodate learning disabilities and learning differences.

> In the academic world, everything is so cookie cutter. Everybody has to learn them the same way, and if you don't, then you say I got a disability… And the truth of the matter is… people don't all think the same way. They don't process the same way. But we don't make curriculum in academics in a way in which it is accessible or appropriate for all people based on how they are wired. (M1)

Most courses were not relevant to life before or after incarceration. Instructors can find ways to utilize students' existing skills or provide students with skills that could be better reframed to help with reentry.

> All our hustles on the street are transferable into the world in some way. But we don't know how to implement that because we don't walk in those lanes. We've never been exposed to that. (M5)

Some individuals would have rather prioritized reentry, community custody, or work over a formal education so they could have better success for themselves and/or their family.

Higher education could be considered in early release decisions and/or students should be provided with stackable credentials for parole review so that people can begin using their education out in the real world more quickly.

> But they're not really educating you in the sense of like all of the programming in there. They're not really designed for you to come out here with it… What they're doing is they're teaching people how to like, manage their behavior, but you don't know how to live… they're not teaching you how to be able to sustain yourself out in the community. (M1)

Continuing Education

The CAB discussed how returning to school would allow them to better support their families, assist with job applications, and provide opportunities to make more money. Having family in mind kept CAB members motivated to learn and to break the cycle of incarceration for their children.

I'm walking out, and my daughter is in the parking lot. I've been gone this entire time. Like I had

> this countdown in my head, that was my motivation… what am I going to do? Because I am scared… I can't let her down … I can't make her go through this… she needs a woman that's going to show up for her and show her how to be a good woman. (M2)

Collaborating with Relevant Entities

After discussing the obstacles of HEP, a conversation ensued regarding the dynamics of collaborating with the three most relevant entities: the Department of Corrections (DOC), HEP program facilitators, and researchers. One CAB member said, "We could go all day long. If

security and DOC is not at the table to say, 'Yes, we can do this,' [or] 'No, we will not do that,' then we're just wasting our time" (M1).

Many CAB members have returned to society and connected with researchers in hopes of changing the system and giving people inside better opportunities.

> [Researchers] play a huge role because you're the bridge that helps us get in. But we're the bridge that helps you get connected to the people. Does that make sense? And so, they're receptive to you based on us, right? And then those people, the powers that be, they are receptive to us because of you. (M1)

Though CAB members recognized the importance of collaborating with others, they have dealt with a system from the inside that disregards them and does not see value in what they bring. They noted a stark lack of diversity, basic knowledge of trauma, and how these impact the people they work with. Traditionally, when people with lived experience have sat down to give insight into their experiences, struggles, and growth for the sake of helping out a project, their ideas, suggestions, and solutions have sometimes been hijacked and misrepresented as someone else's.

> And it's like to me, that's like trauma all over again because for years and years and years, especially minority people you've taken – people have capitalized off of stealing ideas and land and information… Like you're capitalizing off the hardships, but you're not putting us at the seat. (M5)
>
> You're opening this door to have this invitation that… we're going to collaborate collectively… but it's like keeping you in the basement and taking your ideas and coming up to the front and presenting to other people that matter, but not including the person that gave you that information. (M5)

The DOC training process has a very powerful influence on the perceptions and actions of program facilitators (PFs) and researchers. During initial training, potential safety and security risks are emphasized, including the possibility of manipulation by the students. There are often negative images and opinions of people who are actively trying to learn and advance their situation. This comes out in staff statements and actions, which ultimately fosters mistrust and encourages adversarial relationships.

> When you're walking through the door to the DOC and all the staff with the bags, you're not representing us. You represent what the DOC wants to see and hear. Because you, for whatever reason, you're scared. And that's what makes people think that they're DOC because they're not… standing on education. And what they're saying they're doing. They're bowing down to the DOC, which is what everybody else does. So, it's like what we have to think about the people that we're representing and what that really looks like, you know what I mean? Like, what does that really look like? And who are they really representing? Are they representing getting a grant and some funding to get numbers and

> names and checks? Or are they representing really educating people and bringing programs into spaces? (M5)

PFs and researchers learn what fraternization is in its extreme form and they are constantly reminded how a slight breach of protocol could end their assignment. This can instill fear and create a mindset of reluctance and apprehension. Going forward, their actions and thoughts may be biased and scrutinized. Instead of them thinking of ways to teach students, they are thinking of ways to be safe and protect their job. Like PFs, researchers have been hesitant to push back against security restrictions that impede educational progress. One CAB member questioned, "If you're doing research or you're doing whatever, you know, like how can that be effective if everybody is operating out of fear?" (M4).

Rather than expecting PFs, researchers, and incarcerated individuals to perform exactly as expected, the CAB feels that infrastructure should be built to expect mistakes and absorb them rather than condemning projects that could provide substantial benefit to those who participate.

> You're asking for perfection from unperfected people and that's not realistic. So, as soon as somebody do something wrong, now, let's shut it down. That's a hell of a mindset. It don't mean that it wasn't working, but one person fell short or two people… but nevertheless though, that does not mean that it was not a success. (M1)
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> The system is… supposed to be [able] to absorb that… If the infrastructure changes, maybe a lot of that would change… The education is far more important than the mistakes that a couple of brothers and sisters make. (M1)

An Initiative for HEP Peer Support

In a meeting where we discussed what could feasibly be done to improve outcomes for incarcerated individuals, the CAB suggested that the best way individuals with lived experience could assist in improving higher education in prison was through peer support during a critical and vulnerable transition period. Throughout the project meetings, the CAB discussed multiple times the potential value of incorporating peer support into higher education in prison. We begin this section on peer support by discussing the CAB's input on where and when it should take place, an argument as to why peer support is important, followed by the desired qualities and skills from a peer facilitator, and concluding with a potential agenda. The following three sections (5-7) reflect input from the CAB, based on their experiences during incarceration.

Prison Intake Facilities

Entering prison is difficult and unfamiliar. When people enter the prison system through the intake facility, they are assumed to be a high-security risk and stay in their cells for 23 hours of the day unless they are called out for Assessment and Evaluation (A&E). A&E is used in part to determine the security level to which they will be placed and the institution to which an

individual will be transferred. It is where you get your "greens", a matching top and bottom used to identify you as a resident. You are locked in a cell that is often hot and humid and has no windows. Your showers are short, and no shower shoes are allowed. You cannot keep things with you. You are called out of your cell at what seems like random times of the day without any warning or reason. With no explanations and without being able to speak to others, you desire to learn everything you can about prison to prepare yourself and regain some sense of control. One CAB member recalled, "You're just waiting to go home, or you want to get the hell out of here… A lot of times, you just waiting. You're waiting, waiting, waiting. Even after you get staffed, you're still waiting."

The first day every man or woman arrives in prison is the day all efforts are needed to begin preparing for reentry. Education should be at the top of that list. To facilitate education becoming a priority inside prisons, partnering with DOC officials to address some of the frontline barriers will be necessary.

Relationship Building

Being lost, confused, and recently stripped of your humanity and freedom, this time is when you need peer support the most. There is so much distrust towards the system that most people inside will be very apprehensive and guarded when it comes to revealing information. There is a suspicion that people will take advantage of them. Having peers involved gives an initial feeling of validation to those who enter. Hearing the true perspective and reflection of a peer's voice gives it authenticity. Once you have experienced that change, it is also easier to connect and teach past the barriers built over time.

Having peer support upon intake would also help to build trust and vision. Seeing someone who once sat in their seat helps students see that they too can trust in the teaching process and accomplish their goals. Having someone relatable is a key component to establishing trust.

A CAB member shared, "A lot of time brothers would come to me afterwards and say, 'I'm glad that you were speaking, because if it was somebody else speaking, I wouldn't even listen'" (M1). Another said, "When you see individuals who have been impacted – immediately without them ever even speaking a word – it automatically creates hope" (M1).

> Just to see the women see what we're doing out here is going to be the same for the men to see what we're doing out here. It gives them hope and it lets them see that they can do other things. Like they get to see that, to see peer support in a classroom from a formerly incarcerated person. Huge. (M6)

Counselors can do their best to provide resources, but this doesn't show that one cares about understanding the dynamics of schooling or about building trust. System-impacted peers, however, recognize the importance of building relationships and providing consistent support.

Consistent support and understanding builds trust, which leads to community building, which leads to increased self-confidence. Consistent support shows investment.

> And that's one… of the biggest differences about our agenda, is that we understand the importance of better relationships with them and addressing some of the things behind why they don't want to get involved educationally, why they aren't being successful with education. (M9)

Some residents need convincing either by themselves or by others that they are smart and/or deserve to go to school. It is helpful to have consistent reminders that they deserve a better life, that they deserve success for themselves and their children, and that an education is the ticket to that life. They need people who help them overcome obstacles to enrollment like understanding eligibility criteria or embarrassment. The right people will not make you feel embarrassed about where you're at in your learning life or about struggling. People need to know they're not alone. Turning down the volume of prison is difficult. Peers can help turn that volume down as they discuss the transformative power of schooling together.

Peer Facilitators

The CAB has particularly stressed specific criteria for peer facilitators. They need to be open to learning and training. They will initiate conversations with universities and education directors at different institutions to better understand opportunities at different sites along with their eligibility criteria.

Beyond their job responsibilities, peers will have already navigated the journey and will become trusted guides through a very dark time. They should have done the internal work to process their experience, understand their situation, be able to articulate it coherently, and not let their circumstances bring them down. They need to be charismatic and have credibility (i.e., reputable/respected in the community). They should aim to listen and not to give unsolicited advice. Instead, they will learn from everyone's stories and explore what would be the most effective ways to motivate and inspire an interest in education and academic success. A facilitator's role is to understand the psychology to help create lightbulb moments. They know that their responsibility is to make their job obsolete – build enough momentum for people to forge their own paths.

An Agenda for Peer Support

Recognizing the need for a structured proposal and to increase the likelihood of implementation, we outline the vision of peer support for higher education below accompanied by relevant quotes from the CAB.

Goal. The goal of peer-led conversations for HEP is to understand individuals' thoughts and feelings about schooling, start conversations about education during incarceration, build a community around it, and continue supporting those who are actively engaging.

Timing/Setting. Because residents often remain at intake facilities for about two to three months, the CAB believes group conversations can take place over six to eight weeks, for two days a week. For flexibility and accessibility reasons, a virtual option would be helpful. After sessions are over, there will be check-ins and follow-ups.

Recruitment. The invitations to participate should come from individuals with lived experience.

Introductions. Facilitators would begin by sharing their stories: the barriers they faced in education and incarceration. One facilitator may not be enough – having at least two would allow people to gravitate toward the one they connect the most strongly with. The closer peer facilitators can connect to those in the group, the more personal and vulnerable their answers and conversations might be. Perhaps past experiences shared by members of the CAB could also be utilized here. Sharing these stories on behalf of the facilitators and/or the CAB will increase trust and bonding.

> So, my first thought is not asking any questions, but really just… being present… This is my background. This is where I come from, and this is why I'm here… and I came back because of this. I understand that these are some of the things that maybe you don't necessarily think about… You're a stranger. You're just another mouthpiece coming up there talking and you asking them questions… Having that conversation and then ease into… asking them for educational… what they have or even some of the things they dealing with moving forward. (M9)

Understanding educational experiences. After introducing themselves and building up their image as someone who can relate to residents, the group is then invited to share their perceptions of and experiences with education. Facilitators would pay particular attention to why people aren't interested in engaging in school. At the same time, they should recognize the mental status and pain of individuals who have recently lost their freedom.

> I think one of the first things that is important to address. To sort of, like, start it up is… not to ignore the reality of the fact that these individuals that just got their freedom snatched. (M8)
>
> So how do we incorporate a check-in process? To make sure that … [you're] checking in and you… have that bond, then you can have that trust factor and a person know that, 'Wow, I can come in here and get taken care of and it's going to be [taken] care of and I don't have to worry about,' that in itself will be major. (M1)

Facilitators will respond to what people bring to the group, whether that be frustrations, obstacles, or mindsets about schooling. Because some individuals may feel hesitant about

sharing in a group session, individual conversations with facilitators should be considered. Facilitators mustn't tell anyone what to do but rather bounce ideas back and forth.

Transitioning into learning. As the CAB members have shared, putting people in completely new environments and expecting them to do well doesn't work. While this conversation will likely include the transition into prison, it also includes putting people in a learning setting when it is unfamiliar to them. It is important to use the conversations to transition the group into educational thinking.

> You're going through so much transition. School is not what I'm thinking about… Nor am I even knowing that this could be an outlet that can change the trajectory of my life at all. That's not what I'm thinking. But to have people stand in the gap that's a peer person and giving me that affirmation right out of the gate? Guess what? That's a game changer… I'm not just doing time. I'm actually doing something with my time while I'm here. I'm using it for something beneficial… I can grow... That's why it's so effective. And who loses? …It changes the atmosphere inside of the prison because people are starting to engage more in education… It commanded so much of your time. You ain't got time to do nothing else. (M9)

Building a culture around education. The CAB recognizes that people who attend the group will be at different stages of their life and learning. For some, there was no existing culture around education and some individuals might not be thinking about school at all at intake. For others, school is strange to consider later in life. Some people may not believe that they are built for or are worthy of an education. Addressing these internal barriers is as crucial as tackling the external ones. It involves not just structural changes in the prison education system, but also a focus on psychological support and counseling to help incarcerated individuals reshape their self-perception and overcome the deep-seated beliefs that hold them back from seeking something better.

> We can plant some skeleton of dreams or some seeds of hope. It's about hope. All right? But our agenda is to paint a picture, right? We want to paint a thorough picture and the more credibility we got, the more thorough a picture that we can paint or the more we resonate, the more our picture will resonate with them. (M9)
>
> When I was in prison, I found myself in a very hopeless situation. And education got me out of that… and it told me that I was definitely capable of a lot more than I thought I was, and that life would get better. It's still scary, but here I am one year and one month out, buying a house. I got a brand-new car. So, we're moving forward. (M1)

Formerly incarcerated peer facilitators have a unique role here because they can paint a picture of what comes after education, like job opportunities, pay, and other benefits like lower security levels, better reentry outcomes, community custody, and the possibility of building stronger relationships with family. They can highlight people who have returned and have been successful – both people we know personally, but also historical figures. The group can envision re-entry

together. Facilitators can help people recognize their worth and value. Facilitators would help these individuals reimagine their relationships with education. Facilitators would assist with building that culture around education in prison where it might not have existed.

Building Momentum. The job of the facilitators is to help build momentum about schooling and empower individuals to eventually take control of their lives themselves. As a board member instructed, "[you] want a situation where you empower them to do it for themselves… Not tell them what they mean, but showing them, educating them, connecting the resources, and making them feel capable of doing it [themselves]" (M7).

> I didn't feel educationally intelligent, but then once I started doing it, I did. And once I started, that momentum started to build and build and build, build, build, build, and that's exactly what this is. We just helping them build that momentum so they can do it on their own part and do it themselves. (M7)

Resources. While building hope, empowerment, and agency are essential for motivation, providing tutoring, college prep, and/or basic and transferrable skills for learning (e.g., time management, taking notes, active reading) support students during HEP and beyond.

> When you come home, you're so overwhelmed with just the grocery store, let alone… all these life responsibilities of bills and this and that and using technology that you've never used before. Being able to keep on track, it gets overwhelming… I know when I came home, it's like, 'Wait, you want me to figure out what I'm gonna do three months down the road?' …I went through prison… You don't plan, right? It's like this week you can be gone in another. But to get in that mind state… (M5)

Peers would provide a list of educational and vocational programs offered at other institutions as well as their eligibility criteria. They would also connect with educational directors at the institutions and universities to find opportunities across the state. These resources could be provided in the form of a leaflet. Videos could also be recorded and shared to increase accessibility.

Continuing support. Maintaining trust requires consistent support. After transferring, relationships would be maintained via mail or e-mail. Perhaps individuals could assist facilitators by keeping them updated on new programming opportunities at their institutions. This continued communication would also allow for an evaluation of the facilitators and their efforts.

> Basically, everybody in our life almost is gone… I'm on my own. But to be able to have something where individuals, you already know that they [were incarcerated], talked to you, they showed it, they're going to be here through it, …and at the end of this, [they're] going to be out here again for you, that in itself is a game changer because what happens is through the course of time where they're getting educated… the consistency of individuals being there to help them out… there's a trust there where, 'Okay, now I'm not doing it by myself.' (M9)

Conclusion

This project aimed to share the experiences, perspectives, and suggestions of a CAB focused on HEP. This project generated several key themes regarding HEP, culminating in a proposal for a novel peer support initiative. Specifically, we propose that peer-to-peer engagement could substantially enhance the success of HEP programs. We believe the insights shared here could inform HEP program planning among all relevant stakeholders, including directly impacted individuals, correctional administration and staff, and universities.

There are two key takeaways from our work in the CAB. The first is that holding space for the voices of those with lived experiences is essential for the learning of HEP researchers and staff. The key to holding that space is being open to hearing unexpected and potentially unflattering things. As one of our participants shared:

> Keep an open mind. Recognize we're [those with lived experience] going to ask you [university researchers and staff] to think something [about incarceration and education] you've been told not to believe - to not even consider - and that's where [you're] missing the value. That's where [you're] missing the resources that - that man, that man, her and I offered, he offered - [were] missed because [you] refused to even consider that possibility. (M11)

Here, the CAB member highlights that those with lived experience may bring to the table things that researchers do not even consider. Further, those things will be missed if there is no intentional space for the voices and experiences of CAB members.

The second takeaway is that building coalitions with impacted individuals requires creating safe spaces where trust, transparency, and accountability prosper. We made several purposeful design decisions based on community-engaged scholarship and community-identified practices to support such a space (Strawser, 2024). We worked in neutral or collaborative spaces rather than in a university setting that could imply hierarchy. We created expectations and troubleshot issues together. We realized that the priorities and agenda of individuals with lived experiences often did not align with those of university researchers and program administrators. We were willing to challenge our existing thinking. We made sure that all parties benefited from the work in some way. We shared a meal at each meeting and provided ample time within meetings for conversation and relationship-building. We recognized and respected the expertise of everyone on the team.

Through this CAB, the researchers in this advisory board realized exponential growth in their learning outside of academia. The patience and willingness of our directly impacted CAB members to explain their experiences in ways we would best understand has provided the researchers with a broader and deeper understanding of what truly occurs in prisons and schools. While we acknowledge existing organizations that have successfully included people with lived

experience in decision-making and/or real leadership roles (Arroyo et al., 2019; Fine et al., 2001), we believe there is still a long way to go. We hope this paper brings us and our peers closer to that goal.

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