



Formerly Incarcerated Latino Men in California Community Colleges

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■ Latinos make up 22% of the 2.3 million males in state or federal custody (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). In California, Latino men are overrepresented in prison: they are 41% of the prison population, but only 38% of the state population (Sakala, 2014).

The effects of incarceration for Latino men have lasting social and economic inequities for them and their communities. The various effects of incarceration include the psychological effect, generational and community impacts, and economic instability.

STUDY PURPOSE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the disparities that formerly incarcerated Latino male (FILM) students encounter while attempting to achieve positive educational outcomes in community college.

The following research questions guided this study: (a) How do FILMs make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary education? (b) How has mass incarceration shaped a FILM's identity as a college student? (c) What factors (e.g., programs, resources, people), either on or off campus, have supported and/or challenged FILMs to be successful in the community college?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline is evidence of institutional racism and structural oppression faced by students of color.

In the 2009- 2010 academic year, research found 1 in 14 Latino students were suspended annually, compared to 1 in 20 for White students (Elias, 2013). Latino youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to be incarcerated than their White peers, causing nearly 18,000 Latino youth to be annually incarcerated (Hatt, 2011; Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016).

GUIDING FRAMEWORKS

The guiding frameworks for this study included

Critical Race Theory, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory of Development, and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth.

METHODS & DATA COLLECTION

The qualitative design that was used for this study was phenomenology. This study sought to understand how formerly incarcerated Latino men make meaning of their experiences in post-secondary education.

The data collection procedures that I used to conduct this study were one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. The duration of the interviews was between 60 to 90 minutes.

PARTICIPANTS

The ten participants of the study represented a range of diversity. The average age of the participants was 34.5 years. They identified as Chicano/Xicano, Mexican-American, Central American, and Mexican. The length of college enrollment at their community college varied from their first semester to four years. The length of incarceration varied as half of the participants were incarcerated for more than 12 years. All the participants had a desire to at least obtain a bachelor's degree, the majority aspired to attend graduate school, and their average GPA was 3.5.

RESULTS

The findings of this study include the collective and overall experiences of the participants lived experiences and encompass the following themes: (a) academic pathways, (b) homeboy scholar identity, (c) carceral consciousness, (d) resilience, and (e) institutional biases.

"You Should of Learned This in High School"

Participants mentioned their academic pathways were through their decision to start college, the college preparation, and faculty interactions. Specifically, participants described a lack of preparation that stems from being incarcerated during traditional high school years and being in juvenile hall.

In particular, this student population missed the

socialization that traditional students have, such as knowing how to write an essay or submitting an assignment online. Therefore, when this student population arrives on campus, they are in an unfamiliar environment with hidden social norms of being a college student.

"It's Like a Sign of Respect"

Participants described interactions with their peers that are socially different from the experiences when they were incarcerated. Several participants described carceral culture of respect and politics that led to their socialization from being incarcerated. However, participants described a culture shock on their college campuses.

As the participants transitioned through multiple institutional systems, the carceral system and the educational system, participants described a sense of carceral consciousness and feeling stigmatized on campuses.

"I Have a Drug Addiction and Here I am at College Trying"

One of the challenges many of the participants faced was sobriety. They shared how maintaining sobriety was an obstacle they had to continuously work toward and how sobriety continues to influence their decision to be in college. Participants described their experiences with obtaining support for these challenges at their 2-year institutions. Although these challenges were undesirable, being able to overcome these disparities is an act of resilience.

"What the Hell is Wrong with You?"

Several participants described having challenges with financial aid that is unique to this student group. They are challenged with the Selective Service System when men between the ages of 18-25 are required to register for the draft. Several participants experienced challenges when attempting to obtain financial aid because they were incarcerated during that age period. Participants described these biases through their interactions with financial aid and from negative staff interactions. This final finding describes the institutional biases that formerly



incarcerated Latino men encounter at California community colleges.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that formerly incarcerated Latino men are faced with transitioning from their carceral identity, which is forced by the carceral system, to their student identity. Students from this population face intergenerational trauma from first-hand experiences of the school-to-prison pipeline and aspects of their carceral identity may be triggered as they are transitioning to their student identity. Although the participants were aware of their past experiences and the obstacles they had to overcome to be students, they were empowered by their newly formed student identities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEVEL

Formerly Incarcerated Minoritized Students to Disproportionately Impacted Students

Formerly incarcerated students are not specifically identified as the state-mandated student group that two-year institutions are required to include as part of disproportionately impacted students unless the institution chooses to include formerly incarcerated students. It is critical that by including this student population in part of equity plans, that specific resources and funding are made available for these students. Additionally, institutions should include this student population in their data collection to better identify completion attainment of this student group.

Disabled Student Programs & Services for FI Population

Given the participants' experiences with carceral consciousness, Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS) administrators should

consider having carceral consciousness as a verifiable disability for formerly incarcerated (FI) Latino students to assist them in attaining their educational goals. Additionally, as nearly 40% of the formerly incarcerated population has learning disabilities (Vallas, 2016), students should be tested and properly diagnosed for learning disabilities at college entry. Such services provided by DSPS, like test-taking accommodations, specialized instructional support, assistive technology, and note-taking assistance, would be essential for the success of formerly incarcerated Latino students with disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Learning Communities Specifically for Formerly Incarcerated Latino Students

Learning communities specifically designed for formerly incarcerated Latino men should be established to increase engagement and retention. Institutions should design these learning communities by incorporating curriculum focused on identity development and personal growth. Group counseling should be incorporated into these learning communities. Peer-to-peer mentoring should also be available. As Latinx/a/o students are accustomed to familismo and collectivism, Latino students would thrive in a cohort-based program (Pertuz, 2018). By creating these spaces for formerly incarcerated Latino men, it holds a space for them to not feel marginalized at an institution that was not systematically designed for them.

Recruitment and Outreach

Recruitment efforts should include partnerships with their local parole and probation departments. A partnership can also assist in identifying students who have been paroled but were enrolled with an in-prison education

program, and help identify a local community college for students to complete their studies. In partnership with professions, institutions should identify academic and professional pathways for formerly incarcerated Latino students. Additional partnerships should be established with regional food banks, and sobriety and mental health agencies. Institutions should also collaborate with local universities to form partnerships with the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services for undergraduate and graduate students to conduct their fieldwork units in these designated learning communities.

Professional Development and Ally Training

It is critical for institutions to include implicit bias training for faculty and staff. Faculty professional development opportunities for adding support content in their syllabi for resources available to formerly incarcerated students should be implemented. Specific training for financial aid counselors and student workers regarding selected services and how to handle out of state residency when FILMs were sent to out of state prisons needs to be included in professional development efforts.

AUTHOR BIO

Dra. Melissa E. Abeyta (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in Organization and School Leadership at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Her research revolves around using an anti-deficit lens that explores the experiences of formerly incarcerated students in higher education. Dr. Abeyta's research has been recognized as a model of transformation and change. She is committed to serving traditionally underrepresented students in higher education through research and policy.

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