FUNDING FAITHFUL FELONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSITIONS OF EX-OFFENDER SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

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A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to address gaps in post-secondary education research regarding ex-felons’ higher education experiences in order to help student affairs practitioners make campus environments and services more accessible to and welcoming for these populations. This study centers on the experiences ex-felons have had as they have transitioned into, through, and out of higher education.

The Charles W. Colson Scholarship program, a need-based full-tuition and housing scholarship program at Wheaton College, provided the setting for this research. Six ex-felon men who earned bachelor’s degrees through the program participated in one face-to-face semi-structured individual interview of approximately three hours. The interviews elicited findings in five broad areas: (1) personal assets and liabilities, (2) coping strategies, (3) factors influencing disclosure of criminal pasts, (4) educational outcomes, and (5) supports and opportunities for greater support.

Participants’ shared essential experience consisted of three distinct phases centering on their expectations. The Scholars interviewed entered Wheaton College with high expectations regarding their future college experiences. Moving through Wheaton, their expectations increased but shifted to post-graduate aspirations regarding future employment or ministry positions. As they moved out of their higher education experience, they found that their vaunted expectations had become unrealistic given their limitations and liabilities exacerbated by the real world conflicts they faced.
As a result of these conflicts with their lofty aspirations, each participant began to question the pragmatism of his initial expectations, and to deconstruct them in order to reconstruct new expectations. However, this process caused recurring struggles within the participants as some battled with guilt for reconstructing their expectations while others struggled with patience regarding delays in their perceived timelines. No matter the struggles nor how often they recurred, each participant concluded that even if he had not accomplished all, or any, of the lofty goals to which he had once aspired, as long as he invested significantly in the life of one other person, he had accomplished something worthy of the investment that had been made in him.
This dissertation is dedicated to the pastors, staff, and members of Grace Church of Mentor in Mentor, Ohio, and the faculty, staff, students, and alumni of Great Lakes Bible Institute.

To the former, thank you for living before me a robust faith that is simple, yet not easy, to emulate as it mirrors the character of our Lord Jesus Christ and His perseverance to the end.

To the latter, you are my joy and crown. I would very gladly spend and be spent for you as long as the Lord continues to allow me to minister among you to equip the saints for His name’s sake.

~

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.


~

“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
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How incredible I find it that this section is the most difficult part of the dissertation to write! While I am deeply humbled to be at this point on my educational journey, I fear that I’ll fail to recognize all of the individuals who merit special recognition for their love and support along the way. However, since BGSU refuses to graduate me without this manuscript uploaded, I will do my best to remember all of those to whom I owe such a tremendous debt.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

When one first hears of the phenomenon of ex-felons attempting to pursue higher education, it may pique more than a little curiosity. Skepticism, intrigue, encouragement, disbelief, and disgust are among the typical responses I receive when I explain to colleagues and companions that I intend to investigate this understudied phenomenon and this commonly underserved campus sub-population. After all, it may seem logical to question the desire of former criminals, whose criminal behavior may reveal anti-social tendencies (Rose & Clear, 2001) or whose crimes may have victimized individuals or the society, to pursue higher education in organizations whose missions often include the promotion of pro-social behaviors, social justice, and volunteerism. One would assume that only a change of heart, a transformation of character, or a renewal of mind would cause individuals in this group, among whom are perhaps the last individuals one would expect to embark on such an endeavor, to succeed in the higher education environment. The provision of supports relevant to the reentry challenges that confront these individuals in their higher education pursuits offers their best chance for success.

Although ex-offenders may be the last people expected to pursue higher education, they are perhaps those most in need of our support when they do. Unfortunately, researchers know much less about offenders entering higher education post-release than those who pursue post-secondary education while incarcerated. Very little is known about ex-offenders’ attendance patterns, academic advising, remedial needs, persistence, attrition, completion, in-class contributions, funding sources, and post-graduation prospects (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008). In this qualitative research study, I seek to help diminish this gap in the available research by investigating the experiences of a particular group of ex-felons—Colson Scholars—as they transition into, through, and out of higher education.
**Background of the Problem – Higher Education and Reentry**

Despite the high costs of imprisonment, the US still incarcerates its citizens at rates unparalleled by comparable international justice systems, even in comparison to the most undeveloped or underdeveloped countries (Schmitt, Warner & Gupta, 2010). Due to the “tough on crime” era that reigned in the United States for over three decades, the nation’s prison population grew by more than 350% since the beginning of the 1980s, in spite of the fact that crime had declined overall and that the overall population grew by only 33% during the same period (Schmitt et al., 2010).

In the milieu surrounding this “war on crime,” significant cuts occurred to already-limited post-secondary correctional education funding. Incarcerated offenders, who generally qualified for funding due to their incomes, were systematically excluded from access to the Pell Grant despite the fact that many of them had paid taxes to the federal government that funded such grants while on the “outside,” and despite the fact that offenders as a group accessed less than one-tenth of 1% of Pell Grant funds dispersed (Page, 2004). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1993 that denied prisoners Pell Grant funding resulted in the almost overnight collapse of the majority of college-in-prison programs (Batiuk, 1997; Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Gehring & Eggleston, 2006; Page, 2004; Schirmer, 2008; Taylor, 2005; Tewksbury, Erickson, & Taylor, 2000).

Since the loss of Pell Grant funding, declines in post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) have been drastic on every measure. According to Mercer (2009), this legislation was “a pivotal change in the ability of inmates to access higher education opportunities and left states and prison systems with the responsibility for funding the majority of higher education costs in correctional education” (p. 159). Most states, such as New York and Ohio, passed similar
legislation barring inmates from the states’ low-income tuition assistance programs (Batiuk, 1997). Correctional education staff members and instructors were laid off, retired, or relocated, and inmates were often dropped in the middle of their degree programs (Gehring, 1997; Ubah, 2004). Specifically, PSCE programming—available in nearly 83% of US correctional systems in the academic year 1994-1995—remained in less than 55% of US correctional institutions just three years later (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Tewksbury et al., 2000).

Today, only 6% of the correctional population utilizes post-secondary correctional education programming and 86% of that population resides in just 13 “high enrollment” states (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). Unfortunately, at least one state (Maryland) has a PSCE waiting list of over 2,000 inmates (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008). The few programs that survived the funding cuts were most often able to do so because they were able to secure funding through alternative sources, ran their operations through faith-based organizations, and/or were largely reliant on volunteer help (Bayer-Contardo, 2008).

Recidivism reduction is critical to the criminal justice system today primarily for pragmatic and financial reasons. The timing has perhaps never been better to ascertain the impact of higher education on prisoner reentry into the community as post-2008 economic realities in the US have made the prison deinstitutionalization of low-risk offenders, and the reinvestment of the funding saved as a result, a national priority (Schmitt et al., 2010). A drastic example might put things into perspective: if a proactive plan were in place to release “non-violent” offenders—approximately 60% of all correctional populations—this would amount to nearly a fourth of the nation’s correctional budgets restored for other purposes (Schmitt et al., 2010). According to Schmitt et al. (2010), reducing the current prison population by one-half of its non-violent offenders “would lower correctional expenditures by $16.9 billion per year. . . . As a group, state
governments could save $7.6 billion, while local governments could save $7.2 billion” (p. 1).

Schmitt et al. (2010) argued, “The extensive research on incarceration and crime suggests that these budgetary savings could be achieved without any appreciable deterioration in public safety” (p. 12).

The financial ramifications for successful reentry, and the role education has to play in that, has recently been a keen interest of researchers (Delgado, 2012; Freeman, 2008; Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knustson, 2012; Nally, Lockwood, & Ho, 2011; Owens, 2009; Pager, 2007; Pager, Western & Bonikowski, 2009). When offenders enter and/or return to prison, the financial burden is placed on taxpaying citizens; conversely, when inmates are released and/or do not return to prison (particularly non-violent offenders perhaps less likely to reoffend) the financial burden on our nation’s infrastructure is significantly reduced and tax revenues can be rerouted to more pro-social avenues or returned to citizens in the form of higher tax refunds that, when spent, have potential to stimulate the economy (Schmitt et al., 2010). The reallocation of financial resources from public safety to education, housing, healthcare, and jobs is considered “justice reinvestment” (Tucker & Cadora, 2003).

If the higher education experiences of ex-offenders can be enhanced in ways that support their continued persistence toward degree attainment, these educational successes may influence the ex-offenders’ post-release stability and encourage their ability to maintain law-abiding lifestyles. Even if some dismiss social justice reasoning, the fiscal opportunity alone arguably offers significant rationale to investigate the support of ex-felon students during their periods of transition into, through, and out of higher education on college campuses. Helping them persist along the path to higher education may greatly enhance a nation’s, a state’s, or a local area’s
economic prosperity, although economic constructs are quite complex in that they are affected by any number of variables.

**Statement of the Problem**

Little data exist on the campus experiences of ex-felons pursuing higher education post-release as gathering this type of data had simply not been the priority for system players in either correctional or post-correctional higher education. In fact, such research is so scarce that Livingston and Miller (2014) declared, “We know of no research that has investigated the experiences of and challenges faced by students post-incarceration in university settings” (p. 218). As a result, student affairs practitioners likely know little about how they might best support incoming students who may have experienced previous periods of incarceration in order to help make campus environments and services more accessible to these populations. What little information exists about ex-carcerated populations and the college or university experiences they have is relative to the special admissions processes and procedures through which they often must pass in order to access post-secondary educational programs. Additional research could shed light on the extent to which former criminals are receiving support in their transitions into, through, and out of higher education environments. Gleaning more information about ex-offender students will likely educate practitioners on the higher education experiences of this student population and perhaps offer opportunities for campus professionals to enhance current services to best welcome, or become more welcoming, to ex-offender students.

**Purpose of the Study**

In light of this argument, the purpose of this study is to ascertain the nature of the collegiate experiences of ex-carcerated students as they transition into, through, and out of higher education. What support systems, if any, might their experiences encompass or reveal? If
significant campus supports do exist, what difference do they make to ex-offender students, if any? For example, are holistic supports being offered to ex-felons in their transitions into, through, and out of higher education, and if so which of these supports are most meaningful to them in terms of their campus experiences? Since so little is known about the campus subpopulation of ex-offenders, understanding the unique and shared experiences of these students in transition may help student affairs practitioners across all types of college campuses learn more about potential support mechanisms to assist ex-offender students attempting to navigate the often complex world of higher education.

**Delimitations**

Again, when Pell Grant funds supporting most programs for offenders ceased to be available to them as a student population, the few programs that remained were often faith-based or were widely staffed by volunteers. Similarly, scholarship programs for ex-offenders—exceedingly rare in the “tough on crime” era or even today—are generally situated on faith-based campuses (Holding, Dace, Schocken, & Ginsburg, 2010). In fact, the only substantial scholarship program that I could locate for ex-offender students in higher education (i.e., the only program that covers full tuition, room, and board expenses) is the one that I am examining here, that is, the Charles W. Colson Scholarship offered through the Institute of Prison Ministries of the Billy Graham Center of Evangelism at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

Thus, this study is delimited to a Christian liberal arts campus as that is where the Colson Scholarship exists. I describe the scholarship program in detail in the terminology section of Chapter I and in the Research Setting and Context section of Chapter III. However, it is necessary here to explain briefly that this study is specifically delimited to the essence of the lived experiences of ex-offenders relevant to their higher education transitions on a Christian liberal arts
campus as the study’s participants (i.e., Colson Scholars) are all recipients of Wheaton College’s Colson Scholarship. The scope of this study, then, is whether the substantial financial investment the Institute for Prison Ministries has granted the Colson Scholars accompanies significant non-monetary support, such as specific student services supports, during these students’ collegiate experiences.

Another methodological delimitation was the use of self-reported interview data; while memory and recall may be affected by the length of time since participants were students, I used a semi-structured interview protocol, asking follow-up questions as necessary in order to allow past memories to surface. A final delimitation, explained in detail in Chapter III, is the inclusion of only participants who completed a baccalaureate degree; although there are Colson Scholar women, once I removed masters-level, certificate-level, and non-completing Colson Scholars from the participant pool, no women remained as potential participants.

**Research Questions**

I sought to answer the following five specific research questions in the scope of this study:

RQ1: What do Colson Scholars say are the personal assets and liabilities that affected their post-secondary experiences?

RQ2: What coping strategies do Colson Scholars say they employed during their transitions into, through, and out of their higher education experiences?

RQ3: What factors do Colson Scholars report influenced their decisions to either disclose or not disclose their ex-offender status, and what were their experiences when they chose to disclose?

RQ4: What do Colson Scholars report are the outcomes of their overall higher education experiences?
RQ5: In what ways do Colson Scholars believe that Wheaton College supported them, or could have been of more support to them, during their transitions into, through, and out of higher education?

**Significance of the Study**

This study finds its significance in my desire to serve “the most needy student population in higher education today,” the ex-offender population (Page, 2004). Despite the previously mentioned dearth of research relevant to correctional education in general, the research literature reveals substantially more about populations accessing post-secondary correctional education while incarcerated than about those correctional populations who attempt to access post-secondary education following their release. Like many other nontraditional subpopulations, such as veterans and parenting students, it is nearly impossible to identify them unless they identify themselves. In the case of this subpopulation, status identification most often occurs via institution-specific special admissions procedures, although these processes are increasingly the subject of debate since they represent yet another collateral consequence of a crime already “paid for” and perpetuate social stigma against criminal offenders (Custer, 2012; Copenhaver, Edwards-Willey, & Byers, 2007).

Several complementary theories may explain certain aspects of the social stigma ex-offenders feel upon reentering society due to the residue that remains from their period of incarceration and institutionalization (Goffman, 1968; Haney, 2003). The labels society places or has placed upon them carry real disadvantages and collateral consequences (Pager et al., 2009; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989; Stoll & Bushway, 2008). Similarly, internal struggles persist for those individuals who perceive that even after release, they still bear “invisible stripes” (LeBel, 2012). These theories reflect the stigma ex-offenders feel and may affect their willingness to
attend events created for them or to access services made available to them in ways that may not be true of other student subpopulations (Copenhaver et al., 2007).

For this reason, without this study and others like it to help fill in the gaps in what is known about ex-offenders’ post-secondary experiences, campus personnel may be limited in their abilities to provide appropriate assistance to this underserved population. Campus personnel may fail to know how to make their campuses more accessible, specifically for ex-carcerated populations (e.g., in terms of the special concerns that they may potentially need to address for this population related to their persistence, retention, outcomes, etc.). In order to begin such an in-depth discussion of the literature, however, a common vocabulary must be provided so that higher education-related, faith-related, and justice system-related terms utilized throughout the study are understood in light of the full scope of their semantic ranges.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

*Christian liberal arts colleges* are institutions of higher education that specialize in offering a liberal arts education and have some stripe of Christianity as their operating paradigm (Benne, 2001). Although the concepts undergirding secular liberal education can be traced back to the early Greek philosophers, and although the nation’s earliest colleges were instituted to train ministers, Christian liberal arts colleges in their current form have more modern roots in 19th century revivalism and the curricular shifts of that era (Hoeckley, 2008). Wheaton College, for example, like other Christian liberal arts institutions in what Hoeckley (2008) calls the “Evangelical Tradition,” emphasizes education for personal and social transformation. The influence of early 20th century fundamentalism on these institutions brought a high commitment to service, but also fostered a high level of skepticism about extra-biblical knowledge sources, learning as an end in itself, and social transformation apart from divine intervention (Hoeckley,
2008). Although there are certainly a myriad of secular liberal arts institutions as well as faith-based institutions for the liberal arts that are not Christian, the definition in focus here is inclusive of institutions that, like Wheaton College, operate from a Christian paradigm within the evangelical tradition and specialize in offering a liberal arts education.

The Charles W. “Chuck” Colson Scholarship is a scholarship that “provides former prisoners with a college education and life formation program that develops them as Christian leaders” (Institute for Prison Ministries, 2015b, para. 1). According to the associated website, Colson Scholarship awards are “based on need and commonly matched with other funding, including grants, to defray the . . . cost of a Wheaton College education. Awards are for tuition for one degree or credential program only and may cover room, board, and medical insurance” (Institute for Prison Ministries, 2015a, para. 1). In addition to this financial help, “the scholarship program may help with needs that lead the student toward academic success, including tutoring and personal counseling. Students are responsible for transportation costs, personal miscellaneous expenses, and books” (Institute for Prison Ministries, 2015a, para. 1). To qualify, applicants must (a) be a Christian, (b) be an American citizen, (c) have a felony record, (d) be out of prison for at least one full year, and be established in a local church, and (e) for undergraduate studies, possess a high school diploma or G.E.D. and submit ACT or SAT scores (transfer students submit transcripts) (Institute for Prison Ministries, 2015a). Finally, “Felony arsonists, felony sexual offenders, habitual violent offenders and felony offenders under psychiatric care or taking anti-psychotic medication are NOT ELIGIBLE for the scholarship program” (Institute for Prison Ministries, 2015a, para. 4, emphasis in original).

Ex-carcerated refers to formerly incarcerated persons regardless of the type or level of offense for which they served time and regardless of the type of institution where they served that
sentence. Similarly, *ex-offender* refers to a range of individuals, and can be inclusive on the one hand of those convicted of a crime but who never were incarcerated, and on the other hand, inclusive of offenders incarcerated for any length of time. *Ex-felons* are a specific subset of ex-offenders who have been convicted of a felony. Because most felonies carry some length of sentence of incarceration in a jail or prison, it is typical that ex-felons are both ex-offenders and ex-carcerated, although it is very possible that someone could be an ex-offender or ex-carcerated and not necessarily be an ex-felon since that nomenclature is reserved for individuals convicted of a felony-level criminal offense. Of the three terms, participants reported preferring “ex-offender” to the other two titles; out of respect to that preference, whenever “felon” or “ex-felon” is used in this study it occurs because either the literature review mandates it because the research study in question actually did deal with felons or ex-felons as their sample or because the sheer nature of the oft-repeated word suggests that variety created by a substitution would be preferable. Either term is technically accurate for this group of participants because they are convicted felons who have been released from prison. One final note is that technically offenders are those who offend or have offended and felons are those who have committed felonies (although the term as historically and currently used in general social and legal circumstances reveals that one never stops being a felon so that term always technically accurately applies, although I suppose the phenomenon of expungement would make some consider this practice debatable). The reason, then, for using the “ex” in front of the word is to value and affirm the change in these individuals’ personal trajectories. For this reason, although “felon” is used in the title of this study for clarity to signal the category of offense these individuals committed, it is quickly followed up with “ex-offender” in the same title to signal support for these students’ newly-embraced identities.
Ex-carceration or deinstitutionalization refers to the indefinite period of release following incarceration (Clatts, Rodriguez-Díaz, Garcia, Vargas-Molina, Jovet-Toledo & Goldsamt, 2011).

“Good time” is generally the judicial removal of sentenced time or other sanctions removed from an offender’s sentence due to good behavior or some other stipulation, such as academic program completion.

Colleges that are “orthodox” like Wheaton—not to be confused with the Orthodox (capital “O”) colleges related to the Eastern Orthodox Church (e.g. Greek Orthodox, Eastern European Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, etc.) such as Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology—represent Benne’s (2001) categorical designation for higher education institutions that desire to

assure that the Christian account of life and reality is publicly and comprehensively relevant to the life of the school by requiring that all adult members of the ongoing academic community subscribe to a statement of belief. They insist on proceeding from a common Christian commitment, meaning all the ongoing personnel are assumed to live out that commitment at the school. Sometimes students are required to subscribe to a statement of belief, but often they are not held to the same rigorous standards as the adults. This unanimous Christian commitment presumably ensures that the ethos of the college will be Christian. For some orthodox schools, the communication of an ethos is the main point. For others the ethos must be supplemented by employing vision (the intellectual articulation of the faith) in an engagement with secular learning. (p. 50)

Benne’s (2001) terminology is certainly non-traditional; generally, it can be agreed that not all orthodox colleges are Christian, not all Christian colleges are orthodox, and certainly not all religious colleges are Orthodox. However, given the extended description above of what Benne
(2001) described lower-case “orthodox” institutions to be, this term was useful in understanding exactly what type of institution Wheaton College is and what type of institutions could generally be considered peer institutions (e.g., selectivity, general location, student body size, etc.).

*Prison higher education*, more commonly known as post-secondary correctional education, or PSCE, is any education completed by an incarcerated individual that is subsequent to the individual’s receipt of a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (Contardo & Tolbert, 2008). Prison higher education programs can broadly encompass liberal arts and vocational education at the collegiate level, both credit-bearing and non-credit bearing, that offenders earn in whole, or in part, behind bars (Contardo & Tolbert, 2008).

*Prisoner reentry* is a term inclusive of “all activities and programming conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law-abiding citizens” (Petersilia, 2003, p. 3). Boddie and Funk (2012) added that “many prisons offer programs…such as counseling, mentoring, parenting advice and religious programs, but they may also include services delivered after release from prison through parole offices, community organizations and transition centers” (p. 103).

*Recidivism* refers to “a former inmate’s relapse into criminal…behavior; recidivism is measured by the rate at which former inmates return to prison” (Boddie & Funk, 2012, p. 103).

*Rehabilitation programs* are “prison-based programs . . . intended to help inmates become law abiding citizens by providing services such as substance abuse treatment, vocational training, education, counseling, victim-offender mediation, faith-based support groups and prison contemplative programs (such as meditation and yoga)” (Boddie & Funk, 2012, p. 102).

*The Second Chance Act of 2007* is legislation that provided $165 million per year for the delivery of additional education, substance dependency treatment, housing, medical care, and job
training for returning citizens (i.e., ex-offenders) and their families (Zoukis, 2012). Some states—particularly California, Arizona, Pennsylvania and Tennessee—used the funding to improve educational offerings in their jails and prisons or to increase the numbers of students they are able to serve (Zoukis, 2012).

*Vocational preparation* is generally technical or trade-related education to help prepare an individual for a specific applied career or industry job. Moodie (2002) defined vocational education as “the development and application of knowledge and skills for middle level occupations needed by society from time to time” (p. 10).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have offered an overview and justification for the study. In the next chapter, Chapter II, I introduce and review several areas of literature relevant to post-release correctional populations and higher education. Therein, the justifications for providing post-secondary correctional education to offenders and ex-offenders are scrutinized along the lines that this type of service might help reduce recidivism, promote social justice, encourage the financial restitution of victims’ losses, and diminish the societal toll of incarceration on the public. In Chapter III, I explain my investigation of various research methodologies and discuss my postpositivist paradigm, my use of phenomenology as a methodology, and finally, my conceptual and theoretical framework for the study, Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory. Chapter IV contains the findings derived from the research process, and based on these findings, in Chapter V, I offer conclusions as to relevant implications and recommendations for future research and practice pertaining to ex-offender populations in higher education.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A discussion on the philosophies undergirding penal sanctions sets the stage for a conversation of the relative merit of education, and particularly post-secondary education, to function as a rehabilitative tool. Although there is very little research on ex-offenders’ higher education experiences, the scant research that does exist certainly supports the rehabilitative value of PSCE as evidenced in the outcomes section to follow. Such documentation of the evident cost-effectiveness of PSCE and the subsequent successful reentry experiences of former PSCE students has provided reason for some lawmakers and politicians to reconsider funding PSCE (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Goebel, 2005).

Philosophies of Penal Sanctions: Four Goals

Historically, four philosophical goals behind the creation of penal sanctions have been identified (i.e., retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation) (Roth, 2010). Since the population of research participants consists of ex-offenders and since rehabilitation as a penal sanction is so relevant to discussions of education and reentry, I would be remiss not to at least briefly address each type of penal philosophy.

Retribution. The concept of retribution as a penal sanction can be traced at least as far back as Hammurabi’s law code (c. 1700 BC), which Roth (2010) noted “took a literal view of accountability and introduced the law of retaliation” (p. 5). In approximately 1230 BC, the Mosaic Law (recorded in the biblical book of Exodus) called for an “eye for an eye” that some have taken to mean that justice occurs only when an exact repayment of an offense occurs (i.e., a one-for-one).
Roth (2010), however, wrote that “a more appropriate interpretation suggests that there is a set limit for punishment [against the backdrop of the draconian nature of Hammurabi’s code]—that a perpetrator can be punished *up to* losing an eye . . . for a particular offense” (p. 7, emphasis added). Clearly, this penal sanction relates to the principle of proportionality, that is, that criminal sanctions “fit” the crimes to which they pertain. The concept is that victims are repaid for the first offense by the justice achieved through the second offense on their behalf. In modern corrections, the retributive principle seeks to match severity of crimes and sanctions to include the remuneration of victims for their losses, as well as their pain and suffering (Roth, 2010).

**Incapacitation.** The second goal is incapacitation. Simply put, a sanction that successfully removes an offender from the opportunity to commit a crime he or she might otherwise commit (e.g., serial rape) achieves this goal of penal sanctions. However, as one may not even realize from this example, some serial rapists live in general population units or sex offender units, technically meaning he or she still has access to potential victims and may be able to perpetrate additional crimes. In such a case then, the goal of incapacitation has not actually been met.

Examples that are more familiar are theft, assault, and drug dealing. For example, consider a thief, perhaps sentenced to prison, who steals, assaults, and/or deals drugs more inside prison than outside. Such examples suggest that while incapacitation is an important philosophical goal of punishment for some offenders of some crimes, there are others for whom less restrictive environments may be appropriate alternatives to accomplish the same goal of crime prevention.

**Deterrence.** A third philosophical goal behind penal sanctions is deterrence. This goal is broken down into two types; the first is general deterrence. General deterrence refers to the effect
that an offender’s penalty has on the greater society presumably replete with potential criminals. The theory is that as citizens see crimes punished certainly, swiftly, and severely, they are averted from committing such crimes.

In the second type, special deterrence, a specific offender’s future criminal misconduct is theoretically deterred as the individual remembers experiences of past sanctions for similar behaviors. In this second case, the would-be repeat offender recalls the certainty, celerity (swiftness), and severity of his or her past penalties and orders his or her behavior according to the law so as not to experience such inevitable sanctions once more (Paternoster, 1987). While a significant loss of freedom through incarceration or a significant financial penalty in an offender’s past should reasonably have a deterrent effect on that offender in the future, some offenders have been identified and labeled as incorrigible (meaning that no attempts at deterring these individuals will be effective in keeping them from committing crimes, no matter the intervention or dosage) (Pogarsky, 2002). Accordingly, Pogarsky (2002) wrote that "legal-sanction threats are . . . inconsequential for committed offenders who are impervious to dissuasion" (p. 433). They are simply undeterred regardless of the intended deterrent employed.

Rehabilitation. The final identified philosophical goal of penal sanctions is rehabilitation. This goal seeks to remedy some of the deficiencies of the other three goals. Rehabilitation is unique in that it is the only one of the four philosophical goals that takes into account needed change in the offender—not just external conformity due to fear of future punishment but an actual internal change in his or her being. It seems as if the first three have an aspect of crime retaliation or prevention in view, but this fourth goal, of rehabilitation, is the only one concentrated on criminal prevention rather than mere crime prevention (or payback), meaning among the philosophies it is uniquely focused on the individual and not just the criminal act.
Short of providing an exhaustive overview of the history of rehabilitation as an ideal of the US criminal justice system, it is worth noting here that a particular essay in the 1970s (see Martinson, 1974) shifted significant support away from the mission of rehabilitation as a primary goal of penal sanctions toward the broad endorsement of what some would argue were overly-harsh punitive sanctions without regard to their rehabilitative promise for offenders. Martinson’s (1974) article had announced that his review of over two decades of criminological research had led him to one remarkable and singular conclusion: "With few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism" (Martinson, 1974, p. 25, emphasis in original).

This pragmatic conclusion reduced the quality of the entire overarching rehabilitative paradigm to a laser-like focus on the perceived ineffectiveness of the interventions studied, although the studies reviewed actually contained substantial evidence that many interventions did work to mitigate criminal recidivism (Palmer, 1975). Although they did not achieve 100% success, these rehabilitative interventions genuinely worked for some people some of the time—a fact that significantly challenged Martinson's (1974) sweeping condemnation of such interventions (Cullen, 2012; Palmer, 1975).

**The “Tough on Crime” Movement**

Nevertheless, policymakers generally embraced Martinson’s (1974) article as it underscored their own critique of the rehabilitative ideal. In the 1980s and 1990s, the “tough-on-crime” movement, marked by harsh sentences and what some would argue were overly punitive measures, signaled the demise of the rehabilitative ideal. Within a matter of a few years, indeterminate sentencing had largely been replaced by determinate sentencing, sentencing rubrics robbed judges of discretion based on context, and a combination of longer sentences, three-strikes
legislation, and the disappearance of “good time” led to prison overcrowding and expansion (Smith, 2007). Chain gangs, boot camps, public shaming, offender registration, and tendencies to charge juveniles as adults were additional evidences of the growth of the “tough on crime” movement (Smith, 2007). Although violent crime was down, incarceration increased; the most severely affected by sentencing disparities realized throughout the system were African Americans, their households, and their communities (Alexander, 2012; Coley & Barton, 2006; Tonry, 2010; Travis, 2011).

Recently, researchers have given much attention to the “tough-on-crime” movement’s cataclysmic fallout that, according to many in the field, was due to the movement’s often unfairly crafted and overly punitive policies. Particularly, early-2000s criticisms of prison overcrowding and industry privatization, as well as the harsh national economic realities of the late 2000s and today, have driven researchers, economists, and policymakers to seriously investigate the issues surrounding mass incarceration (as well as the issues that could be caused by a mass release of convicted criminals) (Alexander, 2012). While it is true that there is much room for reform efforts in US correctional practices and structures—particularly those that may have led to or exacerbated racial and economic disparities within this era of mass incarceration—proper prioritization for the future means that “recognizing the unique needs of returning prisoners and the abilities of communities to supervise and assist them must precede any reform efforts” (Petersilia, 2003, p. 21, emphasis added).

Reform and Reentry

In order to begin the important conversations about prisoner reentry that can then lead to systematic reform, it is imperative to turn attention to an overview of the correctional population reentering society. This survey begins with an introduction to macro-level quantitative cohort
demographics and continues through an outline of the micro-level qualitative data in order to educate readers on what is known about correctional populations, particularly as it pertains to offender reentry. This survey of the literature includes relevant theories and recent empirical research from scholarly sources, including but not limited to, a broad overview of what is known about adult felony offenders and their attempts to access higher education pre-release and post-release; the individual benefits and societal benefits of higher education; the phenomenon of nontraditional students in both higher education and prison higher education; the experiences of students at four-year Christian liberal arts campuses; the outcomes of higher education for correctional populations; and the role of college financial aid in fostering students’ higher education success.

Throughout the review, I pay special attention to identifying gaps and/or shortcomings in the literature, particularly as it pertains to the use of criminal recidivism as a measure of the quality of educational programs for incarcerated and ex-carcerated individuals. I systematically and critically evaluate, synthesize, and integrate the research literature within the context of ongoing debates in the field of correctional education. Since the vast majority of literature available regarding the education of correctional populations predominantly focuses on in-prison post-secondary correctional education (PSCE), it is by necessity that extrapolation and application of these findings is made to post-release populations, while maintaining respect for contextual differences. Although there is a general lack of information about the experiences of ex-offender populations in higher education, particularly qualitative data and data from primary sources, this study will help fill in that gap.

This study lays the initial qualitative groundwork for future opportunities to compare experiences, campus types, and pre-existing characteristics in quantitative inquiries. Historically,
researchers have collected correctional education data using quantitative methods while lacking the often detailed pictures painted by individual contexts and explanations of lived experiences that qualitative research methods can deliver. Nevertheless, these quantitative studies do allow us to make some helpful assertions about incarcerated adults in the United States based on aggregate demographic characteristics. These grant us a solid foundation for understanding post-secondary correctional education for the currently incarcerated before pursuing a more detailed examination of the post-release higher education experiences of ex-offender populations.

**Incarcerated Adults in the United States**

At the 2012 year-end count, there were approximately 1.6 million US prisoners under federal and state jurisdiction (Golinelli & Carson, 2013). Calculated as a national incarceration rate, the 2012 rate of incarceration for US adults who were sentenced to at least one year behind bars equates to 626 per 100,000 (Golinelli & Carson, 2013). Of these prisoners, approximately 38% were Black, 35% were White, and 21% were Hispanic; nearly 7% were females (Golinelli & Carson, 2013). Approximately 53% were incarcerated for violent offenses, 18% for property offenses, 17% for drug offenses, 11% for public order offenses (weapons, drunk driving, court offenses, liquor law violations, commercialized vice/morals/decency offenses, etc.), and 1% for other offenses (Golinelli & Carson, 2013; Mercer, 2009). This glimpse at the population of incarcerated adults under state and federal jurisdiction masks the larger number of justice-involved individuals under other forms of routine criminal justice system monitoring.

For example, approximately 3% of US adults, or one in every 34 adults in the general population, were under some type of correctional supervision in 2011 (Glaze & Parks, 2012). In the same year, approximately one in 50 US adults was either on probation or parole, and one in every 107 US adults was incarcerated in jails or prisons (Glaze & Parks, 2012). Despite the
prevalence of justice involvement and incarceration in the US, the calendar year of 2012 marked the third consecutive year in which the nation’s overall prison population declined (Golinelli & Carson, 2013). It is critically important to talk about the aggregate characteristics of the current offender population, especially with the realization that 95% of all incarcerated individuals will return to society someday (Petersilia, 2003). Throughout this review of the literature, conversations surrounding reentry support for ex-carcerated individuals require painting the canvas with more narrow brushstrokes to provide readers with more detail on the average inmate.

**Demographic characteristics.** Since 95 out of 100 inmates will eventually reenter society (Petersilia, 2003), the in-prison snapshot naturally closely depicts the ex-offender snapshot. Data on broader prisoner demographics have helped to illuminate the incarcerated population, but shedding light on their reentry challenges requires more detail. Although there are certainly incarcerated individuals who do not reflect any of the following characteristics, they are the exception rather than the norm. Petersilia (2003) offered the following profile of returning offenders:

Ex-prisoners are still mostly male, minority, and un-skilled. . . . Today’s inmate is likely to have been in custody several times before, has a lengthy history of alcohol and drug abuse, is more likely to be involved in gang activities and drug dealing, has probably experienced significant periods of unemployment and homelessness, and may have a physical or mental disability. Most of them have young children, with whom they hope to reunite after release, although in most cases, their children will have infrequently visited them during their incarceration. A significant number of inmates will have spent weeks, if not months, in solitary confinement or supermax prisons, devoid of human contact and prison program participation. (p. 21)
The adult inmate in US prisons today is most often an African American male between the ages of 18 to 34 from a low socioeconomic background (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Mercer, 2009). Persons of color, particularly African Americans, are heavily overrepresented in both the larger criminal justice system and within correctional institutions. (For a more extensive explanation of the possible social, psychological, and political causes of racial disparities in the American criminal justice system, see Alexander, 2012, or Tonry, 2010).

**Educational characteristics.** The average inmate reentering society today will have served more time, be less educated, and be less marketable than those who have been released in previous cohorts (Pager, 2007; Petersilia, 2003). Among correctional education populations, there is a high prevalence of illiteracy, learning disabilities, and mental/emotional/behavioral disorders (Brazzell et al., 2009; Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Harlow, 2003; Leone, Wilson, & Krezmienc, 2008; Petersilia, 2003). A third of the nation’s incarcerated population lacks the credentials required to access higher education; when only state and federal prisoners are considered (i.e., when the jail population is excluded), approximately half have a high school diploma or a GED (Brazzell et al., 2009; Harlow, 2003). Of those who do hold a GED, the majority (70%) have earned these achievements in state and federal prisons while incarcerated (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008).

Although GED preparation is available widely, PSCE is only available to approximately 5% of prisoners in the United States and the majority is limited to correspondence courses (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Gehring, 1997). Participation rates in post-secondary correctional education are generally low—around 10% of the eligible population participates (Tewksbury et al., 2000). According to Crayton and Neusteter (2008), it is “unclear whether choice or insufficient funding and/or capacity explain the disparity between eligibility and participation...
rates” (p. 10). Post-secondary educational attainment continues to represent the “largest disparity in educational attainment between prisoners and the general population . . . with a gap that is almost twice that of high school/GED attainment” (17% and 51% respectively, as of 2004) (Brazzell et al., 2009, p. 7; Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Harlow, 2003).

Indeed, most correctional education exists as either high school level study or vocational training, and approximately 75% of PSCE students are enrolled in vocational or certificate programs (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011; Wheeldon, 2011). Gorgol and Sponsler (2011) noted, “Although all types of PSCE are valuable . . . most incarcerated students are not on an educational pathway likely to result in academic degree attainment” (p. 3). In fact, inmates currently involved in college-level coursework in prisons are 25 times more likely to graduate with a certificate than a bachelor’s degree (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011).

Gorgol and Sponsler (2011) reported on several personal factors that may limit an inmate’s access to post-secondary correctional education, including an inmate’s time to release, age, reason for incarceration, standardized test scores, length of incarceration, and in-prison infractions, among other considerations. Other personal factors can include lack of the basic skills necessary to pursue post-secondary education, pasts of substance dependency, physical and/or mental health difficulties and a lack of financial resources (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Sanford & Foster, 2012).

Environmental conditions that may exacerbate well-intentioned PSCE attempts include lockdowns; involuntary transfers; lack of access to educational materials, textbooks and technologies; noisy atmospheres; policies not conducive to educational pursuits; and possible fluctuations in volunteer and paid faculty and staff (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; MacKenzie, 2008; McCarty, 2006; Sanford & Foster, 2012; Winterfield,
Coggeshall, Burke-Storer, Correa, & Tidd, 2009). In addition, tensions between correctional and educational institutions may affect a student’s ability to earn his or her college degree, primarily because “prisons are closed institutions in which control is the primary concern and questioning authority is not tolerated. In academia, colleges and universities are theoretically open places that encourage questioning” (McCarty, 2006, p. 87).

**Faith, spirituality, and religious observance characteristics.** Gathering some baseline information about the faith adherence, spirituality practices, and religious traditions of correctional populations is important to this research for a few reasons. First, because the ex-offender population so closely mirrors the offender population, understanding the prevalence and exposure of offenders to faith, spirituality, and religion during their incarcerations is important in beginning to understand how faith might influence their reentry experiences. Second, because Colson Scholars are students at Wheaton College, a Christian liberal arts college, it is highly relevant to have demographic information related to faiths within the prison system in order to understand a bit more about the religious environment where Colson Scholars had their conversion experiences and/or practiced their faiths.

Two studies capture recent information on prisoners’ religious practices and observances: (a) a study conducted by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2008) surveying prison chaplains in all US federal correctional institutions, and (b) a study performed by Boddie and Funk (2012) surveying 730 state prison chaplains across the nation. First, the federal chaplains reported that among the inmates in their spiritual care just over 66% profess some sort of Christian faith (compared to 78.4% of the general US population) (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2008). These federal chaplains also observed that the proportions of federal inmates
“professing membership in other [non-Christian] faiths are higher among inmates than in the U.S. adult population” (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2008, p. 13).

The state chaplains reported similar religious adherence rates, but provided additional useful information to aid our understanding of the religious landscape of US state prisons. Seventy-three percent of these chaplains reported that it was at least somewhat common for prisoners to try to proselytize other inmates, and nearly eight in ten (77%) responded that “religious switching” (e.g., from Muslim to Protestant Christian or Protestant Christian to Muslim) is a phenomenon that occurs with either “some” or “a lot” of regularity (Boddie & Funk, 2012). Approximately half the chaplains reported that Muslim and Protestant populations are growing in their facilities, while about a third of the chaplains reported that Pagan/Earth-based inmate groups are gaining membership (Boddie & Funk, 2012).

**Faith and recidivism.** Evidence seems to suggest that faith may play a critical role in offenders’ desistance from crime, particularly post-release. In the aforementioned survey of state chaplains, approximately three-fourths reported considering access to religion-related programs in prison and to faith-based group support post-release “absolutely critical” to inmates’ rehabilitation success (Boddie & Funk, 2012). Of those chaplains whose work is in prisons that have faith-based rehabilitation or re-entry programs, approximately 6 in 10 report that participation has increased and quality has improved in such programs over the previous three years (Boddie & Funk, 2012).

Johnson (2012) found that such committed communities could help change challenging prison environments from the inside out, as they help inmates begin to encourage pro-social behavior amongst one another, breaking away from the typical destructive and anti-social environment of the prison complex. Johnson (2011) found several themes among the qualitative
studies he reviewed investigating the relationship between crime and religion that suggest that faith is effective in criminal rehabilitation. The studies Johnson (2011) reviewed were only conducted with Christian samples since little to no research has been done on these variables with other religious populations. Over half of the studies he reviewed included the first theme, “I’m not who I used to be,” which revealed a break with past unacceptable behavior, the development of a pro-social attitude and behavior, and an internal reconciliation of one’s past, present, and future in order to move forward. Approximately seven out of ten studies that Johnson (2011) reviewed shared the second theme, “spiritual growth,” as offenders reported realizing that they needed to progress and reported having a growing resolve to develop spiritually.

The third theme he found was “God v. Prison Code,” which enables the inmate to oppose and even reverse the typical untrusting prison code, learn to trust others, and develop a willingness to show weakness and spiritual vulnerability before fellow inmates (Johnson, 2011). This third theme is particularly important as Petersilia (2003) noted that the prison code runs counter to effective rehabilitation, and trust and vulnerability are necessary to life. The fourth theme was one Johnson (2011) entitled “Positive Outlook on Life” and represented an inmate’s paradigm shift toward hope and away from cynicism and fatalism, proving growth toward a resilient resolve in the face of incarceration and reentry adversity. The final theme, “Need to Give Back to Society,” is representative of the growth in pro-social desires that inmates with religious involvement often experience, encapsulated in a drive to make a contribution back to society, especially in improving the situation of those with similar backgrounds and experiences (Johnson, 2011).

Conversations surrounding faith-based higher education programming and reentry success may make some in the criminal justice or education fields uneasy, but Delgado (2012) argued that
faith-based initiatives are not novel concepts, have often served as mechanisms of support for prison survival, and have facilitated transitions to society “particularly in the case of relationships developed with religious institutions located in ex-inmates’ home communities where they return” (p. 64). Understanding more about the spiritual lives of ex-offenders also grants us an opportunity to speculate on the role religion might play in offenders’ reentry experiences in terms of post-release support systems and coping mechanisms. For example, to what extent is higher education a coping strategy or to what extent might an individual’s faith represent a significant support? After all, it stands to reason that if religious involvement in faith-based correctional programming can have this type of consistent effect within the correctional institution, it might have a similar effect in combatting post-release reentry issues and perhaps ease an offender’s difficult transition back into society and any subsequent transition into higher education.

Chaplains and religious volunteers are not solely concerned with the spiritual aspects of an inmate’s life. They are also well aware of the physical realities offenders face upon release. In the previously mentioned survey of state chaplains, the most critical factor they reported for inmates’ successful reentry was substance abuse or mental health treatment (Boddie & Funk, 2012). Approximately seven in ten chaplains also called “help with things such as job, housing” and “access to quality programs such as education, job-training in prison” “absolutely critical” for successful rehabilitation (Boddie & Funk, 2012). Chaplains in state prisons appear to be anything but aloof to the challenges facing inmate populations upon returning to their communities.

**Recidivism in secular literature.** Throughout the literature, it seems that criminal justice system administrators’ primary desired outcome is the reduction of recidivism (Batiuk, 1997; Chappell, 2004; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Esperian, 2010; Gaes, 2008; Lichtenberger, 2010; Mercer, 2009; Wheeldon, 2011; Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). Recidivism is
generally calculated as an individual’s re-arrest, re-conviction, or re-incarceration within a three-year period, but definitions may vary by jurisdiction making state-to-state comparisons difficult (Gehring, 2000). Considering these differences, however, researchers have routinely found correlations between increases in prison education involvement and reductions in recidivism (Batiuk, 1997; Esperian, 2010; Lichtenberger, 2010). While this positive outcome is apparent at all educational levels (i.e., including GED programming and vocational education), the most pronounced effect is found in relation to PSCE (Erisman & Contardo, 2005).

Meta-analyses performed on studies of recidivism among PSCE program participants have consistently reflected significant reductions in recidivism rates. (For a well-articulated assessment of the quality of these meta-analyses among other relevant correctional education outcomes reviews, see Gaes, 2008). Wilson et al. (2000), for example, reported a 26% decrease while Chappell (2004) noted a 46% drop. In a study among offenders with various education levels, Lockwood et al. (2012) found age, race, and failure to complete high school each correlated with increases in recidivism rates. In Lockwood et al.’s (2012) study, the recidivism rate among offenders with a college education was 31%, but was 55.9% among those offenders who had less than a high school education. Simply put, it has been “empirically established that the more education acquired by inmates the less likely they are to return to the correctional population” (Mercer, 2009, p. 153).

Finding similar results with their qualitative study of women involved in post-secondary correctional education, Torre and Fine (2005) noted that those who attended college in prison experienced fewer re-arrests, re-incarcerations, and parole violations; committed fewer post-release crimes; and maintained greater levels of compliance with their parole conditions (despite the fact that 92% of the ‘within college’ sample were convicted of violent felonies). Torre and
Fine (2005) found that these recidivism reductions were the result of changes in the women as they became increasingly involved in the prison college experience. The women Torre and Fine (2005) interviewed believed that it was college that gave them the skills they needed to have something to give back to their families; now they serve as role models, help with homework, and fulfill previously broken promises.

Finally, Schirmer (2008) noted that many secondary benefits of post-secondary correctional education may also correlate with reduced recidivism rates, including “increased psychological well-being, fewer inmate infractions, [more] role models in prisons, increased self-esteem, and a strengthened identity” (p. 30). One can infer from the demonstrated relationships between increased levels of education and greater reductions in recidivism that post-secondary correctional education may hold great promise for rehabilitative correctional models in the future.

**Benefits of Higher Education**

Supporting incarcerated students to achieve their goals becomes necessarily complicated for administrators of prison higher education. Educational outcomes expected for the general population (e.g., skill development towards employment preparation) may be inapplicable to inmates involved in PSCE depending on the lengths of their sentences and their likelihood for future release. Since 95% of incarcerated individuals will eventually be released and return to society, the private (individual) but also the public (societal) benefits of higher education are worthy of discussion. Such benefits for the general student population have been well-documented (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Individual benefits.** Students who complete—and even those who just attend higher education for some time—experience several distinct benefits such as gains in verbal/quantitative/subject competencies and cognitive skills, and intellectual growth, moral
development, increased financial stability, and enhanced quality of life among other known benefits (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As cited in Baum, Ma, and Payea (2013), calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau data revealed positive correlations between level of education and wages earned, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. The Census Bureau data also demonstrated that graduates of post-secondary education enjoy more employer-paid benefits (like health care and pension benefits) than those groups who are not college graduates.

U.S. Census Bureau data also revealed that not only are college graduates’ earnings higher, but the earnings gap between high school and college graduates continues to expand (as cited in Baum et al., 2013). According to calculations performed on 20 years of census data, Baum and Ma (2007) noted that the “earnings benefit is large enough for the average college graduate to recoup both earnings forgone during the college years and the cost of full tuition and fees in a relatively short period of time” (p. 2). In addition, college graduates enjoy non-monetary benefits including greater opportunities for themselves and their families and better health overall (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Because of these significant correlations between higher education and measures of private good, the systematic gaps in access to higher education opportunities as found in the census data and reported by Baum et al. (2013) (such as differentiated participation by family income, parent education level, and other demographics) should be disconcerting as they have real potential to persist. However, for the underrepresented students in higher education who are able to attend, the individual benefits this post-secondary education brings can mean significant positive outcomes over a lifetime. Thus, educating prisoners “allows them access to the many economic and social benefits associated with higher education…. Post-secondary correctional education offers a chance to break the cycle of inequality” for these students’ future generations
(Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. v). Torre and Fine (2005) wrote that correctional education students are “perhaps the finest reminders that with higher education, individuals from across race, ethnic and class groups—the very young people who attended severely under-resourced high schools and were told they were not college material—can learn that individually and collectively they can reshape the future” (p. 591).

**Societal benefits.** Not only does higher education result in private good for individuals, but significant social or public good also results from individuals’ pursuit of higher education. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau and from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as cited in Baum and Ma (2007), revealed correlations between post-secondary education attainment and lower rates of unemployment and poverty; also, those adults with “higher levels of education are less likely to depend on social safety-net programs, generating decreased demand on public budgets. . . . [Even] the earnings of workers with lower education levels are positively affected by the presence of college graduates in the workforce” (p. 2). In addition, according to multiple sources of secondary data from the National Center for Health Statistics, the National Opinion Research Center, and the U.S. Census Bureau, as cited in Baum et al. (2013), graduates from college are less likely to smoke, will generally have healthier lifestyles, and are more likely to vote, engage in community volunteer work, and exhibit openness to the opinions of others. Clearly, the pursuit and completion of higher education generally carries with it significant personal benefits, but also significant societal benefits as well.

It is clear there are both great individual and societal benefits realized from higher education for any population, but post-secondary study may hold more promise for formerly incarcerated correctional populations. The effect of their redirection from crime to prosocial endeavors like education represents significant societal gains across communities and the nation.
As Ford and Schroeder (2011) found, “College attendance and investment in higher education are negatively associated with criminal offending in adulthood. In addition, the protective effect of higher education is stronger for individuals who were more delinquent during adolescence” (p. 32). This conclusion, from a justice reinvestment standpoint alone, cannot be easily dismissed.

**Nontraditional Students**

Within higher education, “traditional” students would typically be considered those who fall within the 18 to 22-year old demographic and reside on-campus (Falk & Blaylock, 2010). However, recent demographic shifts have been so significant that researchers currently estimate that only 16% of students enrolled in public and private two- and four-year institutions are both traditionally-aged and residential (Falk & Blaylock, 2010). In addition, more than half of college students today are older students taking classes part-time (Falk & Blaylock, 2010). Among non-traditional adult learners on college campuses, students reentering society from jail or prison are particularly “high-risk” (Levin, 2007).

In higher education. U.S. Census Bureau data reveal that significant gaps exist in college enrollment rates for students by income and parental education (as cited in Baum et al., 2013). Since formerly incarcerated students are more likely than the general population to come from low-income and less educated families, they are also generally underrepresented in higher education (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Based on their calculations of U.S. Census Bureau data, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data, and data from Snyder, Tan and Hoffman’s *Digest of Educational Statistics 2005*, Baum and Ma (2007) reported that nearly all top standardized test scoring students were from the “top quarter of families in terms of income and parental education . . . but about 25 % of those in the lowest
socioeconomic quartile do not continue their education after high school” and are significantly less likely to graduate than individuals of other demographic groups when they do enroll (p. 2).

There are also persistent gaps in college enrollment rates by race and ethnicity, gender, and geography evident in the available data from both the NCES and the U.S. Census Bureau. In comparison to other college student groups, Blacks and Latinos who matriculate are less likely to persist to graduation, and students “from rural areas and male students also have relatively lower levels of participation in higher education” (as cited in Baum & Ma, 2007, p. 2). Again, the importance of these student gaps is that they reveal what groups are participating and succeeding in higher education at what rates; higher enrollment and completion rates among these student groups would mean immeasurable positive effects on future generations to come for these individuals, their underrepresented groups, and society as a whole.

Baum and Ma (2007) calculated U.S. Census Bureau data and reported that representation and underrepresentation in higher education tends to perpetuate itself as “young children of college graduates display higher levels of school readiness indicators . . . [and among] high school graduates from families with similar incomes, students whose parents went to college are significantly more likely to go to college themselves” (p. 2). Although support services on college campuses have generally expanded in recent years to include all types of non-traditional, underrepresented, first-generation, and low-income student groups, the attendance, persistence, and degree attainment rates of these groups are still generally significantly lower than those of White, traditional age students from higher income brackets and/or from college-educated families (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Reason, 2003; Tinto, 2012).

In correctional education. The correctional population is comprised mostly of non-traditional, first-generation, underrepresented, low-income students who, overall, are
underprepared academically for college-level coursework (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Falk & Blaylock, 2010; Harlow, 2003). With few exceptions, prisoners (and by extension, ex-offenders) consistently underperform their peers in writing, communication, literacy, and other language skills as well as in math skills and quantitative literacy (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Harlow, 2003). These students, as a whole, lack the prerequisite learning that would provide the essential foundation required for them to perform successfully at the collegiate level (Falk & Blaylock, 2010). As a result, it is perhaps no surprise that researchers in one study found that although 90% of the offenders they interviewed reported a desire to attend college or a technical school after their release if given the opportunity, less than 40% of them actually had plans to attend (Hanneken & Dannerbeck, 2007).

Underprepared students who do attend college are particularly at-risk for attrition from the university (Falk & Blaylock, 2010). The under-preparedness of correctional education students is well-documented (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005), and understanding the uniqueness of the ex-offender population’s level and areas of under-preparedness as they access higher education is of paramount importance for those educators attempting to contribute to their academic success. Since there is a natural increase in the amount and level of difficulty of college-level coursework compared with high school level or GED level courses, students who enter the university with low skill levels are distinctly disadvantaged if they do not receive appropriate remedial education.

While the correctional education movement lacks data at all levels, specific data on program participation, persistence, attainment, and test scores are among the most poorly documented aspects of correctional education programs (Coley & Barton, 2006; Crayton & Neusteter, 2008). As Brazzell et al. (2009) noted, “Little data are available on the involvement of
formerly incarcerated individuals in educational programs in the community” (p. 12). Therefore, the discussion throughout this literature review will focus primarily on education within correctional institutions, with application to post-release higher education for this population. Such a dearth of research suggests a need for increased examination of the concerns surrounding ex-offender students’ persistence as they cope with reentry, including a need for increased investigation of persistence trends and coping mechanisms—a gap in the research this study attempts to address.

**Outcomes of Liberal Arts Colleges**

Regardless of institutional religious-affiliation, liberal arts institutions seek to foster certain characteristics in their students; these skills may be of particular help to ex-offenders attempting to gain or retain employment. For example, at a minimum, students should be skilled enough to communicate well orally, write well, ask good critical questions, think critically and creatively, and work as a team; truly the integration and application of liberal learning cannot be overestimated (AAC&U, 2005). Liberal arts colleges challenge students to develop higher-order thinking skills (such as synthesizing, integrating, and applying knowledge) (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Among other benefits, liberal learning may also strengthen students’ intellectual resilience, self-discipline, civil courage, faith, determination, high standards, positive thinking, democratic citizenship, civic engagement, endurance, personal and social responsibility, loyalty, critical thinking and evaluation, inner fortitude, self-knowledge, personal renewal and fulfillment, self-balance, and ethical anchoring (AAC&U, 2002; AAC&U, 2005).

Liberal education assumes (a) that students desire to develop intellectually, personally, and socially, (b) that faculty members guide that development, and (c) that certain subjects support the goals of liberal education (Ratcliff, 1997). As consensus has shifted as to what a college-educated
person should think, know, and be able to do, such divergent ideologies have expanded, contracted, and modified disparate curricular design foci (Fuhrmann, 1997; Hawthorne, 1997; Hutcheson, 1997; Ratcliff, 1997). Those who might argue that vocational preparation alone is best-suited to the offender population due to the types of employment accessible to them upon release fail to consider the vocational value of liberal education (Lagemann, 2011). According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2002, 2005), the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow the liberal learner to succeed are attractive to potential future employers; it is reasonable, then, that these outcomes should aid ex-offenders in obtaining and maintaining post-release employment.

A liberal education enriches all of life’s relationships and it encourages values of “human dignity, equality, justice, responsibility, and freedom” to be caught and taught in the liberal learning environment (AAC&U, 2007, p. 22). Indeed, “liberal education in all fields will have the strongest impact when studies look beyond the classroom to the world's major questions, asking students to . . . develop analytical skills and ethical judgment to significant problems in the world around them” (AAC&U, 2002, p. xii). Liberal arts education gives offenders an avenue through which to “develop a broader frame of reference within which to evaluate life choices” (Gaes, Flanagan, Motiuk, & Stewart, 1999, p. 399).

**Religious Colleges in Higher Education**

Benne (2001) described institutions like Wheaton College as “orthodox,” meaning that they strongly hold that the Christian framework is relevant to all of life and require community members to commit to a common statement of belief. According to Benne (2001), Christianity is pervasive at the orthodox college or university as it represents the functional ethos of the institution and the Christian mission unites campus community members (Benne, 2001).
Traits. The less that religious diversity characterizes a religiously affiliated institution, the less diversity typically exists at that institution on almost any other variable (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) (Benne, 2001). As a result, incoming students at these institutions who identify as underrepresented or historically marginalized may experience significant barriers to building community (Strange & Banning, 2001). Institutions are beginning to target some of these areas within the parameters of their beliefs, and Ibbotson (2006) noted that, at least for Bible colleges, there is great “need for significant research regarding ways to promote women and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds to leadership” in order to help these places and spaces become more inviting to students of similar backgrounds (p. 51).

Religiously affiliated institutions may be well-poised to support the faith of ex-offenders in higher education. According to Hirt (2006), faculty members at religiously affiliated institutions are quite welcoming, promote students’ spiritual development, identify with the mission, and prioritize the integration of faith and learning. Although Hirt (2006) reported that faculty salaries and benefits were limited at religiously affiliated institutions, she noted that the faculty viewed their work as a calling and believed they were successful at integrating faith into their work, collaborating with student affairs, affirming their students in mentoring relationships, and relating to one another as family. Faith-based institution or not, students’ interactions with faculty are critical to encourage their inclusion, communicate high expectations, and welcome their big questions (Kuh et al., 2005; Parks, 2000).

Religious, spiritual, and worldview development. Among institutions of higher education, religiously affiliated colleges are distinctive. Although they certainly share some of the educational goals and objectives of secular institutions of higher learning, they are often characterized by specifically-targeted faith-based student outcomes, distinctive campus
environments and social climates, and an integration between faith and learning that is pervasive across the curriculum (Benne, 2001). Through this intentional application of faith to learning, faculty and administrators of religiously affiliated colleges attempt to impart a coherent faith-based worldview absent from the secular university, at least as a framework for institutional operations (Benne, 2001).

**Religious and spiritual development.** Summarizing findings from the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that these earliest decades of research into students’ religious beliefs and practices revealed that college attendance generally led to declines in these variables as measured. Referring to their earliest volume on higher education outcomes (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted “consistent evidence of declines (by about 10 percentage points) in students’ traditional religious affiliations during their college years and in their general religious orientations (perhaps 20 percentile points over four years)” (p. 284). Overall, they reported that students were more apt to individualize their beliefs and increase in tolerance for the religious views of others throughout their college experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Over the 1990s and early 2000s, however, the five studies (which used nationally-representative samples) Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified and reviewed in their second volume all found increases, however small, in students’ value for religion.

Some other studies, however, present a mixed picture. For example, researchers found that attendance at church-related colleges generally correlates with fewer changes in students’ religious affiliation and religiosity (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Railsback (2006) found that rates of students who identified as “born again” when entering college and no longer identified as such when leaving college were highest at Catholic colleges (59%), private universities (45%), public four-year colleges (32%), Protestant
colleges (31%), and CCCU (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities) colleges (6%) respectively. Some students reported their religious beliefs and convictions as stronger/much-stronger since they started college: 82% of students at CCCU colleges, 65% at HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities), 51% at private universities, 47% at Catholic colleges, 44% at Protestant colleges, 33% at public universities, 32% at public four-year institutions, and 30% at non-sectarian colleges (Railsback, 2006). Sixty-three percent (63%) of students identifying as born-again reported stronger/much stronger beliefs after four years across all institutional types (Railsback, 2006).

Likewise, Gonyea and Kuh (2006) investigated relationships between student engagement and spirituality-enhancing activities during college and found that students at faith-based institutions scored the highest on participating in spiritual activities, gains in spiritual development, and gains in ethical development when compared to students at other institutional types. Some of the most recent literature includes findings that confirm the earliest literature, suggesting that “although numerous interactions exist between the individual and institutional levels, spiritual development is generally greater at non-Catholic religious institutions than at secular schools” (Bowman & Small, 2010, p. 609). Therefore, it would appear from the research that students at religiously-affiliated colleges are at least reaffirmed in what they already believe. There are two distinct criticisms of this assessment: (a) such findings might point to a vacuum within these religiously-affiliated institutions of their students’ encounters and engagement with diverse thoughts related to their faiths, and (b) more recent studies challenge the findings in the previous literature.

To the first point, if religiously-affiliated institutions’ abilities to uphold students’ perhaps fragile belief avoids any critical challenge to that belief or opportunity for the students to
encounter other strongly-held beliefs systems for awareness and assessment of difference, the fact that the educational experiences at these institutions serve to encourage students’ faiths may be less inspiring. This may be the case at certain types of religiously-affiliated institutions. For example, Gonyea and Kuh (2006) found that although institutions with strong religious commitments (their “faith-based/fundamentalist” group) scored highest on items related to spirituality, their students were found to have had more homogenous experiences in college and to score lower on deep learning measures (although the homogeneity corresponded with a greater sense of belonging to community, and the differences between faith-based/fundamentalist and public institutions were not statistically significant on deep learning measures.) Gonyea and Kuh (2006) found that students at non-affiliated private colleges and universities engaged less frequently in activities that enhance spirituality, interacted more often with peers with diverse viewpoints, and finally, engaged more frequently in deep learning activities.

To the second point, contradictory literature exists that calls into question student declines in spirituality overall. Utilizing Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) data, Lee (2002) found that 37.9% of college students surveyed actually strengthened their religious convictions and beliefs, while 48.3% reported no change, and only 13.7% reported weakened convictions and beliefs over their four years in college. Similarly, a recent poll of 1200 current undergraduate students found that 25% reported having become more spiritual since entering college while only 7% reported decreases in spirituality (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2006).

Two assertions ought to be made about the contradictory literature: (a) the variables under study are complex and terminology matters, and (b) religious beliefs and religious behavior may have been conflated in the literature. By their second volume, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) had already begun to observe the intricate nature of religious identity development: “Research
published since 1990 concerning development of religious identity during college suggests the process may be more subtle and complex than previously thought” (p. 218). Part of the reason for this, as Estanek (2006) pointed out, is that by the end of the 1990s, spirituality and religion began to be differentiated within higher education literature, reflecting larger observable trends. Estanek (2006) argued that the current discussion of spirituality in higher education had been so divorced from its religious roots that its meaning had changed, that there was no common definition beyond patterns that recur amongst definitions, and that the dialogue within the academy surrounding spirituality as a result is a new discourse altogether. There is a general lack of clarity surrounding the use of terms related to religiosity and spirituality in the research literature today underscoring the fact that aspects of religiosity are subtle, complex, and refuse to be characterized monolithically (Barry, Nelson, Davarya & Urry; 2010; Evans, Forney & Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stoppa & Lefkowicz, 2010).

Second, it appears that belief and behavior may have been conflated in the literature. The earliest declines noted by researchers often included or focused on those related to religious activities and acts of worship (Gonyea & Kuh, 2006). Some of the more recent studies spotlight religious convictions and beliefs (Lee, 2002), and gains and decreases in spirituality (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2006). Although the latter represent oft-repeated contradictory literature, they merely illuminate changes in students’ perceived spiritual commitments and development but do not address practices. To be fair, some studies suggest that institutional differences in student spiritual development “are fully explained by student engagement in religious and spiritual behavior” (Bowman & Small, 2010, p. 610). Students’ perceptions of their religious beliefs may, however, fluctuate in ways unrelated to their behavior, as Stoppa and Lefkowicz (2010) found: “In the aggregate, significant declines in the behavioral aspects of religiosity were observed
across semesters. In contrast, importance of religious beliefs remained relatively constant during this time” (p. 23). Based on researcher findings across several late-1990s and early-2000s studies, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) questioned whether or not the shifts were less about students’ religious values as much as in the ways in which they think about religion, suggesting, based on Cherry et al. (2001), that these students were subtly examining, evaluating, reexamining, and reevaluating their religious beliefs and commitments in ways not necessarily aligned with denominational influences.

While these examples leave no doubt that future research and specificity is needed in this research area involving spirituality and religiosity in higher education, it is equally clear, as Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) summary of higher education outcomes revealed, that college represents an unparalleled time for young adult students to pursue personal and spiritual identity development, and as a result, significant changes often occur. Not only have student outcomes of spiritual and religious development been documented, but moral development has also been noted in the literature.

**Worldview development.** Funk (2001) identified the elements of a worldview as including (a) beliefs about the nature and sources of knowledge (epistemology), (b) beliefs about the ultimate nature of Reality (metaphysics), (c) beliefs about the origins and nature of the universe, life, and especially humanity (cosmology), (d) beliefs about the meaning and purpose of the universe, its inanimate elements, and its inhabitants (teleology), (e) beliefs about the existence and nature of God (theology), (f) beliefs about the nature and purpose of humanity in general and, oneself in particular (anthropology), and (g) beliefs about the nature of value, what is good and bad, what is right and wrong (axiology) (Funk, 2001, para. 12). In their research on worldview
transformations, Schlitz, Vieten, and Miller (2010) defined a worldview similarly, while also capturing the complexity and coherence of the framework:

A worldview combines beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, and ideas to form a comprehensive model of reality. Worldviews also encompass formulations and interpretations of past, present, and future. In our worldviews, we construct complex conceptual frameworks to organize our beliefs about who we are and about the world we live in. (p. 19)

Schlitz et al. (2010) argued that despite the fact that people seem to generally connect shifts in an individual’s worldview merely to psychological development or maturation, they posited that “[worldview] transformation involves epistemological changes in how they know what they know. It is not only behavior that changes, but also the motivation….It is not only a change in what people do, but also in who they understand themselves to be. (p. 20)

Olthius (1985) suggested that

the ultimate questions of life lie deep within the heart of everyone. Who am I? Where am I going? What's it all about? Is there a god? How can I live and die happily? And everyone answers such questions, if only partially or implicitly. The answers we give to these queries about the human condition may be called our worldviews or visions of life. They may or may not be thematized or codified, but they do make up the framework of fundamental considerations which give context, direction, and meaning to our lives. People have always been absorbed in these questions: they have been an essential ingredient of every society. (p. 1)
Olthius (1985) concluded that “assumed in faith rather than deliberately produced through rational inquiry, ultimate answers lie behind all our creative living and thinking” (p. 5). Olthius (1985) contended, however, changing worldviews is a sign of growth in one's faith (p. 8). If worldviews are to be viable, they must be mutable (Olthius, 1985). That is, worldviews morph “as faith deepens, as insight into reality grows, and as individuals and cultures themselves move on to new stages in their development” (Olthius, 1985, p. 9).

**Outcomes of Post-secondary Education for Correctional Populations**

For all of the reports the public hears about party schools, campus misconduct, or out-of-control student loan borrowing, few would likely attempt to argue against the aforementioned evidence that attending college, and particularly completing a college-level academic program, results in tremendous gains for the educational recipient. Researchers have compiled the results of thousands of studies that, with few exceptions, document the benefits that college students receive following their pursuits, and especially completion, of post-secondary education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

One of the best known practitioner-oriented research volumes in higher education today is one in which researchers Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) synthesized over 2,500 studies to help readers understand what evidence there is that change occurs in students during college, as a result of college (i.e., net effects of college), between colleges, within colleges, to certain groups in colleges, and long after students or graduates have exited colleges. The pair found that students experienced gains in areas of their verbal, quantitative, and subject matter competencies; cognitive skills and intellectual growth; psychosocialization; attitudes and values; moral development; educational attainment and persistence; career and economic impacts; and quality of life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Unfortunately, there is not currently a similar volume containing extant literature relating the benefits of post-secondary education on correctional populations. What little is known about the effects of college on correctional populations is contained in a few articles and generally has much more to do with methodologically questionable investigations into recidivism than the scrutiny of other outcomes or college effects. However, based on known general outcomes of post-secondary correctional education for non-offender populations, it is possible to speculate what some of the in-prison and post-release outcomes of higher education might be for correctional populations in particular.

**In-prison outcomes.** According to Torre and Fine (2005), the “core elements of education, such as self-reflection, critique, and inquiry, enable a transformed sense of self. . . . [Inmate-students shift] from seeing themselves as passive objects into seeing themselves as active subjects, developing a sense of critical, personal agency,” allowing them to traverse from “inmates” to “students” although their circumstances remained unchanged (p. 581). Torre and Fine (2005) also contended that the pro-social endeavors in which the college women they had interviewed engaged after their prison-in-college programs were simply outgrowths of their transformative experiences. These women came out of the programs “far less likely to violate facility rules than they were before college. Prisoners in the college program tend[ed] to opt away from trouble, especially if participation in college courses could be jeopardized” (Torre & Fine, 2005, p. 587; Zoukis, 2012).

**Post-release outcomes.** Studies consistently reveal significant effects between increased collegiate education and (a) increased post-release employment, (b) increased post-release participation in education and service, (c) reduced recidivism rates, and (d) other outcomes (Aos,
Miller, & Drake, 2006; Coley & Barton, 2006). The following section will consider those outcomes one by one and address studies, or aspects of studies, related to each.

**Increased post-release employment.** Research suggests that some post-release outcomes are directly results of post-secondary correctional education, such as increased employment opportunities. In fact, Erisman and Contardo (2005) said that the “most important benefit of post-secondary correctional education is the prospect of improved chances for employment after release from prison” (p. 8). If this is true, employment opportunities are an essential element to deter those who actually are deterrable (Pogarsky, 2002).

According to Delgado (2012), while those who have less than a high school education find avoiding crime extremely difficult upon release, those inmates who have earned a GED or have completed any post-secondary education have taken steps toward increasing their options in a competitive job market. The unemployment rate for released offenders in 2006 was 48%, but the rate of unemployment for offenders released in 2009 was 69.7% (Nally et al., 2011). During the recent economic recession, Nally et al. (2011) found that ex-offenders located work in certain job sectors that seemed more likely than other fields to incorporate ex-offenders (i.e., temporary help services, manufacturing, construction, and lodging and food services).

Interestingly, the ability to obtain employment does not necessarily mean reduced likelihood to recidivate, but what does reduce parolees’ recidivism, according to Bahr, Harris, Fisher, and Armstrong (2010) was their ability to find an “adequate” job. In other words, merely obtaining a job—if it meant that the ex-felon was still underemployed or not paid a livable wage—made no significant difference in parolees’ successful reentry to society (Bahr et al., 2010). For ex-offenders in this predicament, the lack of ability to find a job added stress into their lives; for ex-offenders able to find adequate work, many noted that the work was a helpful
resource for their reentry success. As the total number of hours an ex-offender worked went up, his likelihood of successfully completing parole also increased (Bahr et al., 2010).

Owens (2009) interviewed 17 ex-carcerated college students and found that “the credentials and skills acquired through college participation help formerly incarcerated individuals successfully face the challenges of reentry” (p. 316). Research “overwhelmingly demonstrates the power of employment in the lives of ex-offenders and is conclusive that the ex-offender’s inability to secure and maintain legal work places him or her at risk for reoffending” (Brown, 2011, p. 340). Arguably, the more education that a prisoner is able to receive while incarcerated, the more marketable he or she will be outside of the correctional institution, increasing the likelihood that the inmate would obtain gainful employment and decreasing the likelihood that the offender would return to a life of crime (Zoukis, 2012). Not only does employment limit the risk for reoffending, but Brazzell et al. (2009) found that “employment helps former prisoners support their families and pay child support and other debts” like victim restitution (p. 17).

Among the critical barriers to employment that ex-offenders face are legal, skill-level, and educational/training limitations; the stigma associated with a criminal record; and the increased competition in the job market due to the elevated unemployment rate (Brown, 2011; Freisthler & Godsey, 2004; Owens, 2009). Racial and ethnic minorities often experience additional challenges such as institutionalized racism in hiring structures (Case & Fasenfest, 2004; Pager et al., 2009). That is, when looking for jobs, unemployed ex-offenders who are also Black/African American experience “double jeopardy” in a society still practicing subtle race discrimination (Pager, 2007). Owens (2009) reported that his interviewees suggested that many of “the stigmas associated with
incarceration, as compounded by effects of race, collateral punishment, and time lost to incarceration, can be addressed through the college experience” (p. 324).

Based on their findings, Livingston and Miller (2014) similarly concluded that a college education offers ex-offenders a means to build identity, human and social capital that offer tangible prospects for overcoming the structural barriers associated with incarceration, racial inequality, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Higher education, particularly that offered or continued in the community postrelease, has the potential to meaningfully improve the lives of former prisoners and, as an institution, it likely holds more promise for structurally disadvantaged former inmates than other social institutions scholars point to for success. . . . Significant additional investments are necessary to ensure the academic success of formerly incarcerated students from disadvantaged communities—to provide them with the time, resources, and supports necessary to engage in campus life, thrive academically, and negotiate community reintegration more generally. (pp. 237-239)

More research needs to be done on how correctional education, and more specifically post-secondary correctional education, impacts post-release employment. Cho and Tyler (2008) found that participation in adult basic education was associated with a higher likelihood of successfully gaining employment upon release, with the largest effects realized for those participants who enjoyed the greatest amount of uninterrupted education. Lockwood et al. (2012) conducted a five-year follow-up study of 6,561 offenders released in 2005 from the Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) to five metropolitan counties within the state. The study examined the effect of education and post-release employment on recidivism and found that “an offender’s education and employment were the most important predictors of post-release
In other words, offenders would likely return to the IDOC custody if they were unemployed” (Lockwood et al., 2012, p. 380). Therefore, the following cannot be overstated: Helping offenders to gain a college education during prison and assisting them to establish themselves in stable employment post-release (made more obtainable, perhaps, due to that education) are quite possibly the two most essential supportive directions in which criminal justice efforts ought to be steered if reduced recidivism is the goal.

**Increased post-release participation in education and service.** In terms of post-release results for their study, Torre and Fine (2005) found that the additional post-release effects of college on women who participated in PSCE included economic well-being, health, civic participation, persistence in pursuing higher education, sustained employment (particularly in social services areas), graduate school attendance (most often majoring in social work), stable housing, increases in community and/or church involvement, and improved relations with family and friends. When asked about how they defined success, prisoner students spoke of occupations, behaviors, and motivations; their definitions “ranged from the spiritual to the practical” (Hall & Killacky, 2008, p. 307).

According to Torre and Fine (2005), positive effects of the women’s college attendance benefited themselves, their children, and the prison environment and granted them resources to be successful post-release, benefiting broader society as well. Torre and Fine (2005) concluded that education for prisoners can transform lives and communities, reduce crime, and save tax dollars now dedicated to prison construction and maintenance (p. 589). Superintendents also reported that PSCE program graduates who remained in prison were more likely than the average inmate to engage in service to fellow members of the correctional population, such as to “develop and administer many prison-based programs including anger management, substance abuse, HIV and
AIDS, domestic violence, sexual abuse, parenting skills, and support and prenatal care” (Torre & Fine, 2005, p. 583).

Participants also regularly reported that post-secondary correctional education positively affected their thinking in ways that motivated them to avoid conflicts within the correctional institutions (Winterfield et al., 2009). According to research by Torre and Fine (2005), correctional education not only results in academic achievement, but also in personal transformation, expression of responsibility for crime and future decisions, reflection on choices made in the past and decisions to be made in the future, and civic engagement. Torre and Fine (2005) also found that correctional students learned resilience, positivity, purpose, responsibility, a desire for improvement, a new perspective, and a commitment to giving back within the peer support, tutoring, and mentoring systems available.

**Increased religiosity and reduced recidivism.** The high cost of the correctional complex in the United States merits strict scrutiny. Significant numbers of prisoners return to society daily, often without meaningful supports to help them reintegrate. These ex-offenders run real risks of falling back into lives of crime even when released with what seem to be the best intentions not to reoffend. Evidence-based programs that prove to be successful in assisting offenders within correctional facilities—as well as act as intermediaries to assist them upon release—by extension, have the best likelihood of helping these ex-offenders successfully maintain crime-free lives, especially given the importance of ongoing support and connection to services (Petersilia, 2003).

Well-rounded faith-based programs may be uniquely situated to provide this type of support to ex-offenders, and research suggests that they are more effective than secular programs (Johnson, 2011). Since volunteers often run faith-based initiatives, the cost savings from these programs can be incredible (Holding et al., 2010; Zimmer, 2005). For example, O’Connor and
Perreyclear (2002) found that faith-based programs in one state cost approximately $200 per inmate, while comparable secular programming costs the system approximately $14,000 per inmate.

Despite faith-based organizations’ limited research evidence, faith-based reentry support systems have enormous potential (Delgado, 2012; Johnson, 2011; Mears, 2007). Although faith-based programs are effective in offender rehabilitation, many researchers, social scientists, and policymakers, have overlooked the powerful potential of these programs to the extent that, until recent decades, there was scant research on the topic (Johnson, 2002; Johnson, 2011). However, trends are visible in the extant research (Zimmer, 2005).

After controlling for level of involvement in Prison Fellowship sponsored programs, Johnson, Larson, and Pitts (1997) found that those prisoner-participants who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to experience re-arrests during a one-year post-release follow-up period. In a later recidivism-tracking study of over 1,800 participants, Johnson and Larson (2003) evaluated InnerChange Freedom Initiative’s (IFI) participants’ two-year post-release recidivism rates by tracking them and comparing them to non-participants from comparison groups (IFI is an extensive pre-release and post-release faith-based prison program operated by Prison Fellowship Ministries that contained both in-prison portions and aftercare portions as parts of the program). IFI graduates were re-arrested at a rate of 17.3%, while the comparison group’s rate of re-arrest was 35% (Johnson & Larson, 2003). Eisenberg and Trusty (2003) measured IFI graduates’ re-incarcerations at 8%, while a matched comparison group had a re-incarceration rate of 20%.

Much of the success of these programs may be due to their ability to aid offenders in understanding themselves in relation to their criminal culpability, to offer them hope in spite of
the difficult day-to-day circumstances of incarceration, and to help them adjust to their abrupt and prolonged losses of freedom (Clear & Sumter, 2002). Not only can religious involvement in prison help ex-offenders refrain from criminal activity post-release (Eisenberg & Trusty, 2003; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Johnson, Larson, & Pitts, 1997), it can also help minimize in-prison infractions among offenders (Kerley, Matthews, & Blanchard, 2005; O’Connor & Perreyclear, 2002).

Religious and faith-based programming can be a tremendously effective tool in offender rehabilitation as it helps offenders replace antisocial tendencies with pro-social behaviors (Kerley et al., 2005; Zimmer, 2005). Faith-based programs may be particularly effective with incarcerated individuals because these individuals may be change-motivated and solution-seeking (Camp, Klein-Saffran, Kwon, Daggett, Joseph, 2006; Fine et al., 2001).

According to Johnson (2011), the central argument is that “faith-motivated individuals, faith-based organizations, and the transformative power of faith itself are proven keys in reducing crime and improving the effectiveness of our criminal justice system” (p. xi). Johnson (2011) rests this assertion on his review of 273 studies spanning 1944-2010 that related crime/delinquency variables to religiosity variables. Ninety percent of the studies revealed an inverse relationship between the crime/delinquency and religiosity variables, while 8% revealed mixed results or were not statistically significant (Johnson, 2011). Only 2% of the studies revealed a positive relationship between crime/delinquency and religiosity (Johnson, 2011).

Similarly, Clear and Sumter (2002) found that “higher levels of inmate religiousness are associated with . . . fewer self-reported disciplinary confinements” (p. 126). This pro-social attitude was also found by Johnson (2011) in his qualitative studies; offenders spoke of spiritual transformation with five themes that were “consistent with elements thought to be essential in
order to achieve rehabilitation . . . themes which reflect behavior and attitudes consistent with those one would hope for in achieving offender rehabilitation” (Johnson, 2011, pp. 131-133). Ultimately, Johnson (2011) concluded that a “faith-based program combining education, work, life skills training, mentoring, and aftercare . . . [can] influence in a paradigm-shifting way the prisoner reentry process . . . with the expectation that this approach will substantially enhance achieving the secular and correctional goal of rehabilitation” (Johnson, 2011, p. 116, 121). The assumption is that for such programs to be successful, faith and/or spiritual purposes would influence college-going decisions for correctional populations, both in-prison and post-release.

Despite apparent promise, much of the quantitative literature investigating the effect of religiosity on recidivism suffers from the same methodological design flaws that plague research of the effects of post-secondary correctional education on recidivism (Mears, 2007). Problems in measuring the effectiveness of such programs manifest themselves as researchers struggle to find comparable secular programs against which to test them, and the future generalizability of findings is limited and “cannot be generalized to the general ex-offender population groups” (Delgado, 2012, p. 65).

**The Role of Financial Aid in Fostering Correctional Students’ Educational Success**

It is important to appreciate the contextual history of the funding battle for post-secondary correctional education. Although Pell Grants had been the “single most important influence on the growth of prison higher education throughout the 1970s and 1980s” (Wright, 2001, pp. 13-14), prisoner-students’ eligibility for the funding, and its use for post-secondary correctional education, had always been under attack. According to Wright (2001), much of the disagreement between the pro-PSCE and anti-PSCE camps existed because some “felt that prison should emphasize deprivation, and [others] thought that prison should plan for the eventual reintegration
of the prisoner back into society” (p. 14). The anti-PSCE camp argued that awarding prisoners Pell Grant funds would divert resources from the deserving, cheat the system, waste taxpayer dollars, abandon existing rehabilitation programs, reward criminal behavior, increase crime, and ignore victim pain and suffering (Page, 2004). The pro-PSCE group contended that Pell Grant funding laws required that all qualified needy students receive the grants, that the funding the prisoners accessed was minimal (less than one-tenth of 1% of all Pell Grant funds), and that PSCE was considered a good anti-recidivism investment promoting better in-prison behavior (Page, 2004).

Clearly, historic controversy has surrounded correctional education funding (Page, 2004). Researchers have demonstrated a PSCE “evidence-based best practice” that “retention rates and grades are notably higher when students must make a financial contribution to their own educations. . . . Thus, although educational offerings to the students would be highly subsidized, they [should] not be free” (Sanford & Foster, 2012, p. 610, endnote 10). However, that statement was based on research conducted in relation to currently incarcerated students who presumably had little outside of commissary purchases vying for their in-prison funds (Sanford & Foster, 2012).

It is presumable that offenders who are simultaneously attempting to purchase, rent, or otherwise establish housing, transportation, clothing, food, and other provisions post-release have more and greater competing costs out of necessity (Rose & Clear, 2001). The challenges of meeting these basic needs do not include justice system related expenses such as fines, restitution, court fees, or costs associated with supervision (Rose & Clear, 2001). Formerly incarcerated citizens may also “return to the community without a job or with a low-paying job, lacking savings or assets, with poor credit histories, and with a significant amount of debt from child
support and criminal justice expenses” (Brazzell et al., 2009, p. 38). Although there is a good deal of information on the funding of in-prison correctional higher education (Erisman & Contardo, 2005), there is little existing research regarding how offenders pay for their college educations post-release.

The enormity of the financial pressures and concurrent stressors reentry places upon returning citizens, especially those with little to no network of initial financial support, have been well-documented (Brazzell et al., 2009; Rose & Clear, 2001). One important study recently named funding as the biggest obstacle hindering formerly incarcerated persons from pursuing their education after release (Hanneken & Dannerbeck, 2007), and there is no reason to believe that significance no longer exists—although the most recent shifts in ex-offender eligibility for financial aid are in returning citizens favor. In fact, Brazzell et al. (2009) wrote

One of the most difficult challenges to continuing one’s education after release is funding, despite the fact that people just released from prison are often eligible for financial aid. . . .

Yet education can be a valuable investment and, given their low incomes, many former prisoners qualify for need-based financial aid for post-secondary education. . . .

Unfortunately, formerly incarcerated people are often unaware of public and private funding sources that may be available for continuing their education. (p. 38)

**Eligibility of ex-offenders for financial aid.** According to Turner et al. (2007), only one-third of adult students stated that they received student loans, and less than a third received any federal or state grants or private scholarships. Nearly a third of adult students reported obliviousness that financial aid was even available to them (Turner et al., 2007). Since 60% of adult learners reported living in single-income households, funding considerations are often critical to higher education access for adult students (Turner et al., 2007).
Adult students are routinely denied both federal and state financial aid due to past drug convictions; even minor drug convictions restricted student aid based on the 1998 and 2000 amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Archer & Williams, 2005; Finzen, 2005). The 1998 amendment, known as the Souder amendment, ensured that drug offender students remained ineligible for any federal grant, loan, or work assistance after release, depending upon time after release and type of offense (Archer & Williams, 2005; Custer, 2012). That is, a first possession offense denies aid for a year, the second for two years, and the third indefinitely (Archer & Williams, 2005). Restrictions associated with drug sales are two years with the first offense and indefinite illegibility with the second (Archer & Williams, 2005).

Federal aid is not the only type of aid unavailable to felony drug offenders. Some state financial aid is also unavailable to drug-felon students in higher education; in fact, several states link their eligibility regulations for need-based financial aid to the federal regulations under the Higher Education Act—meaning if an offender fails to qualify for the federal aid due to a drug offense, he or she is automatically disqualified from receiving the state aid (Archer & Williams, 2005). For example, felons in Florida and Kentucky are not eligible for various scholarships and grants (Archer & Williams, 2005). Oklahomans are required to pledge that they do not commit criminal or delinquent acts, or abuse drugs or alcohol, in order to qualify for the needs-based Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (Archer & Williams, 2005). In addition, South Carolinians seeking need-based grants must document that they have no felony convictions, or drug or alcohol-related misdemeanors, within the academic year before seeking assistance (Archer & Williams, 2005). Finally, Texan students are ineligible for the state’s needs-based grant program for any felony or any controlled-substance-related convictions (Archer & Williams, 2005).
Impact of financial aid for certain ex-offender subpopulations. Lovenheim and Owens (2013) investigated the impact of restrictions on the receipt of financial aid on the college enrollments of ex-offenders convicted of drug offenses. Analyzing data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Lovenheim and Owens (2013) found that the financial aid restrictions resulted in a large, negative impact on college attendance for this subpopulation. For example, they found that the two-year ban on aid added an average of two years to the amount of time it took drug convicts to enroll in college following their high school graduations (Lovenheim & Owens, 2013). Not only were these students less likely to attend college at all, those who lived in urban areas and whose mothers did not attend college were the most negatively affected (Lovenheim & Owens, 2013).

Archer and Williams (2005) observed that the majority of jurisdictions denying student-aid based on criminal activity did so in relation to drug-related offenses specifically. According to Archer and Williams (2005), in academic year 2000-2001, approximately 67,000 FAFSA-completers indicated they had been convicted of selling or possessing drugs (11,000 more left the question blank); approximately 103,502 students indicated convictions for drug offenses (Archer & Williams, 2005). Of this latter number, authorities denied aid to nearly 40,000 students (Archer & Williams, 2005). According to Archer and Williams (2005), approximately 140,000 post-secondary students disqualified themselves from accessing federal aid on these grounds since the restriction began.

Wheelock (2005) contended that prohibiting ex-felons from the ability to receive school grants and loans or restricting their access to such aid has substantial ramifications, specifically for those racial minorities who would be disproportionately affected. Correlations between race and poverty persist, and students of color rely disproportionately on financial aid to attend college
(Archer & Williams, 2005). Since courts disproportionately adjudicate state and federal drug convictions against persons of color, these bans on aid have racially disparate impact on students of color and perpetuate economic inequality (Archer & Williams, 2005; Wheelock, 2005).

The recent relaxation of the eligibility restrictions for drug offenders for federal financial aid appeared to have no deterrent effect on the commission of future drug felonies, no change in college enrollment for non-drug-related offenders, and no change in college enrollment for those charged with drug offenses but not convicted (Lovenheim & Owens, 2013). Lovenheim and Owens (2013) concluded that for students convicted of drug offenses, ineligibility for federal financial aid strongly—and negatively— influenced college enrollment decisions.

**Restoration of the eligibility of ex-offenders for financial aid.** The Higher Education Act reauthorization following 2008, significantly relaxed some restrictions on eligibility. For example, today students found guilty of drug-related offenses may have their eligibility for federal student aid restricted only if the crime occurred during a period in which the student was receiving such aid (United States Department of Education, 2014). In addition to the unilateral restrictions of federal and state aid of students convicted of drug offenses, Pell Grants are also specifically denied to students who, following a period of incarceration for certain sexual offenses, receive an involuntary civil commitment (i.e., are committed involuntarily, by a judge, to treatment for their problems) (United States Department of Education, 2014).

Despite these restrictions on aid, students convicted of these offenses are encouraged by the representatives of the US Department of Education to contact the Federal Student Aid Information Center (FSAIC) to ascertain how the law might address their particular situations and to determine their eligibility within the law (United States Department of Education, 2010). Currently incarcerated would-be students may apply for federal financial aid prior to release so
that the processing of their application for aid occurs in time for the next enrollment period (United States Department of Education, 2014).

As part of their FAFSA applications, these students will complete a series of required screening questions online or on a mailed worksheet to help aid administrators in determining how the conviction affects their eligibility status. Even if they are deemed ineligible for federal assistance, such students are still encouraged to complete the FAFSA since state or institution-specific aid may remain available to them and is often dispersed, in part, based on FAFSA completion (United States Department of Education, 2014). Students finding themselves still ineligible due to drug-related convictions may restore this eligibility by completing approved programs for drug rehabilitation or by passing two unscheduled drug tests performed by an approved rehabilitation program (United States Department of Education, 2014).

If students regain eligibility for financial aid during an award year, they are encouraged to notify the financial aid office of their corresponding institution immediately so that they might receive the aid for which they may be eligible (United States Department of Education, 2014). Finally, students are cautioned that if they are found guilty of a drug-related offense after the submission of their FAFSA, they may not only lose eligibility for the aid but may also be required to repay any aid received during the period in which they were ineligible to have received the aid (United States Department of Education, 2014).

Examples of federal student aid programs available for the academic year 2014-2015 to all students—including all released offenders with the exception of drug offenders and some sex offenders who committed their acts during the time they were receiving aid—are the Pell Grant, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG), Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant, Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grant, Federal
Work-Study, Federal Perkins Loan, Direct Subsidized Loan, Direct Unsubsidized Loan, and Direct PLUS loan (United States Department of Education, 2013). Although ex-offenders are eligible for the Lifetime Learning credit, they are ineligible for the HOPE tax credit (Cooper, 2005).

**Stigma, Labeling, and Invisible Stripes**

Although the needs of nontraditional student populations in higher education in general are increasingly addressed, ex-offenders as a nontraditional student subpopulation receive little special attention (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Haney, 2003). I am able to speculate, based on a number of theoretical foundations, a few inferences about the experiences adult ex-felons might encounter when seeking access to higher education post-release, such as social stigma theory (Goffman, 1968), labeling theory (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989), and invisible stripes theory (LeBel, 2012).

**Stigma theory.** Incarceration, and the process of institutionalization, can create such psychological stress for ex-offenders that post-release adjustment and coping with the accompanying social stigma and collateral consequences may seem impossible for them (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Goffman, 1961; Haney, 2003). Haney (2003) argued that imprisonment created habits that were “natural and normal adaptations made by prisoners in response to the unnatural and abnormal conditions of prisoner life,” and not due merely to pathological behavior (p. 6). Haney (2003) contended that these constituted “habits of thinking and acting that could be dysfunctional in periods of post-prison adjustment” (p. 4).

Haney (2003) also explained the gradual and subtle internalized psychological adaptations necessary to adjust to a restrictive environment where a person exerts little control over his or her life or individual decision-making. The psychological adjustments to prison life include
dependence on institutional structure and contingencies; hyper-vigilance, interpersonal distrust and suspicion; emotional over-control, alienation, and psychological distancing; social withdrawal and isolation; incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture; diminished sense of self-worth and personal value; and post-traumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment (Haney, 2003, pp. 7-12). Those who have entered prison earliest, stayed longest, and have been characterized as "special needs" populations (ex-offenders with psychological issues) are among the most affected by the psychological adjustments necessary to cope with prison (Haney, 2003).

Owens (2009) theorized that college might help reduce criminal reoffending because it “facilitates social transformations . . . as an opportunity-generating institution . . . by combating direct and indirect stigmas associated with the criminal record; helping account for time lost to incarceration; and providing a means by which participants could pursue quality, gainful employment” (p. 336). Owens (2009) wrote that the college experience “diverts attention from potentially stigmatizing aspects of an ex-offender's identity. When pursuing work, college credentials created opportunities for participants to make other aspects of their identity (in this case educational attainment) salient for employers apart from the criminal record” (p. 337).

Formerly incarcerated persons report facing significant stigma upon reentering society (Rose & Clear, 2001). Not only do they feel a sense of shame, they also report feeling “labeled” as a criminal and discredited in society; their options are to change others’ opinions of them, live with those opinions, isolate themselves or relocate to a place where no one is aware of their past (Rose & Clear, 2001). Those who succeed in changing societal opinion reported reconnected relationships and improved belonging and trust, while those who are unable to change others’ opinions of them experience the same alienation by their networks, heightened anonymity, and low level of integration, belonging, trust and participation that isolation would produce (Rose &
Clear, 2001). Although relocation is an option, it is less than ideal due to loss of social supports and social capital as well as contributing to low residential stability critical to successful reintegration (Rose & Clear, 2001).

According to Owens (2009), college “provided former prisoners with a practical way to explain time lost to the incarceration and with a relatable way to signal their interests and abilities to potential employers” (p. 337). Owens’ (2009) study suggests that college experience helps formerly incarcerated individuals access quality employment by deploying powerful social symbols that help counter stigma in an increasingly credentials-based economy. Thus, post-secondary education presents the kind of interventionist strategy that—working in concert with other equally beneficial opportunities—promotes desistance from crime and helps ensure public safety. (p. 338)

Lockwood et al. (2012) found that offenders’ education level and their employment status were the most important predictors of their post-release success in avoiding recidivism. Brown (2011) theorized that ex-offenders who successfully connect to employment upon release are in a “better position to reap the benefits of structure, daily routine, and the social opportunities afforded by work, thereby lessening their potential for developing negative social networks and interest in reoffending” (p. 338).

**Labeling theory.** Many adult offenders are labeled as deviants when they are juveniles, and according to the secondary deviance hypothesis (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989), future deviant behavior “is contingent on (1) the public nature of the label, (2) exclusionary reactions by others, (3) an alteration of personal identity, and (4) support from deviant others” (p. 378). Although research shows juveniles are less likely to reoffend if the deviant label remains private, many juveniles never had the family structures and system of care sufficient to support positive
decisions and the uphill battle. They have lived the experience of the “symbolic interactionist tradition,” that is, the phenomenon that “the experience of being labeled is instrumental in the creation of both a more deviant character and a more deviant lifestyle” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 361). It is much harder for an ex-offender to disavow deviance in a culture that will not allow him or her to forget his or her past; investigations such as this study are critical to understanding the labels given to, and other stigmatizing experiences endured by, ex-felon populations accessing higher education.

**Invisible stripes theory.** By definition, ex-offenders have been found guilty by the criminal justice system and generally received, in addition to their formal sentences, a set of restricting informal sanctions, consequences, or labels (or “invisible stripes”) that extend long after the mere formal sanction(s) are satisfied (LeBel, 2012). These problems, however, are systemic and nearly unavoidable for many offenders who overwhelmingly come from poor, underprivileged, marginalized populations (Goffman, 2009). Blacks, for example, who have been statistically overrepresented in prison populations, suffer from prejudicial social interaction evidenced in part by employers’ greater willingness to hire Whites and Latinos who are similarly qualified (or even less qualified) for a variety of positions (Pager, 2007).

These events can all work to exact a heavy toll on, if not deplete and eradicate, the social capital of an offender (Rose & Clear, 2001). College attendance and employment opportunities post-release may counteract that loss of human and social capital. Ubah (2004) wrote that this idea emanated from the notion that acquiring college education credentials while in prison would provide inmates with legitimate human capital . . . such as marketable labor skills and trades [that could equip them] for better job opportunities, which in turn could build social bonds that protect against criminal behavior . . . [by giving them] skills and
knowledge that can help . . . [them] abandon criminal behavior when released to the free society. (p. 74)

However, more recent disconfirming evidence reveals that a college education may do little to reduce the effects of racism, regardless of the lack of a criminal record (Pager, 2007).

Freeman (2008) advocated finding ways to create policies that would “minimize the adverse effects of the flow of information on past criminal behavior on the employment prospects of ex-offenders . . . increasing the employment prospects of at least some ex-offenders, which would in turn decrease recidivism” (p. 409). If anything, these policies might serve to even out the field of social privilege so that unemployment is decreasingly a factor on a long list of informal consequences of crime. Having employers who are willing to give these ex-offenders a second chance as a result of these policy changes, and despite the offenders’ lack of employability elsewhere, may make better employees out of these ex-offenders as they see someone finally believes in them—an empowering realization.

As the correctional complex in the US is downsizing, unprecedented numbers of ex-offenders—along with their psychological trauma and maladjustment—will return to society (Haney, 2003). For many, the collateral and psychological “consequences of incarceration may represent significant impediments to post-prison adjustment . . . [such as] the transition from prison to home . . . successful re-integration into a social network and employment setting” or may affect an ex-offender parent’s capacity to resume parental responsibilities (Haney, 2003, p. 15). Haney (2003) called obtaining gainful employment “the most critical aspect of post-prison adjustment” (p. 19), and the shifts in the US economy caused by globalization and the advent and expansion of an economy increasingly built on the service industry (as opposed to manufacturing) make transitions into higher education an increasingly inevitable reentry strategy.
In such a milieu of stigma, particularly as it has the potential to affect obtaining employment so significantly, a question seems to be ever-present: “When background checks are increasingly part of routine job application processes, is a college degree enough?” Perhaps not. “Ban the box” movements, an initiative undertaken to remove the box indicating criminal history from employment applications, have gained momentum in recent years (Stoll & Bushway, 2008). By delaying employers’ knowledge of a potential job candidate’s criminal history until an actual background check has been run, the movement seeks to allow ex-offenders the opportunity to make a first impression and be judged on the merit of worth of their education, credentials and experience rather than their pasts (Stoll & Bushway, 2008).

These changes do not occur overnight, however, and employer discrimination once background checks are received is another matter, and perhaps one that cannot be directly addressed by the ban the box movement or by earning a college education. Researchers have noted that the “stigma of incarceration and the psychological residue of institutionalization require active and prolonged agency intervention to transcend [and] job training, employment counseling, and employment placement programs . . . [are] essential parts of an effective reintegration plan” (Haney, 2003, p. 19).

**Special Admissions Processes**

Due to concerns about risk mitigation and campus safety, responses to recent high-profile campus crimes have driven increased scrutiny through special admissions processes for ex-offenders who wish to become students (Hughes, White, & Hertz, 2008). A “special admissions” procedure refers to an extra requirement or set of requirements in the higher education admission process through which a special population must pass; for ex-offenders, special admissions procedures may consist of an essay submission on the nature of the crime, an interview with
college or university personnel, a submission of their criminal history to the institution of higher education, a consent to a background check, or some other extraordinary requirement related to their criminal history (Custer, 2012). Special admissions processes ex-offenders face, when combined with the other societal obstacles and social stigma they encounter, may have a negative effect on an ex-offender’s resolve to pursue higher education (Copenhaver et al., 2007). Programs that have special admissions processes, however, have been shown to be more ethically engaged in attempting to ensure that an ex-offender was treated fairly during the application process and not simply dismissed because of a box that had been checked (Haski-Leventhal, Gelles, & Cnaan, 2010).

Some contend that admitting individuals with criminal pasts actually enhances community safety since the formative benefits of education on literacy, employment, and recidivism have been well-documented (Custer, 2012). Other reasons used to justify the policies include the institution’s need to know, financial aid provisions and distributions, and the enhancement of mechanisms of student support (Custer, 2012). Substantial research indicates the educational benefits for former offenders and the mitigation of societal risk that may exist (Custer, 2012).

There is some argument against the special admissions processes, however, on the grounds that there is no proof that offender screening makes campuses safer, that the policies discriminate against minorities, that the institutions have no legal duty to perform such checks, and that these processes actually negatively affect applicants already reeling from the effects of societal stigma (Custer, 2012). Copenhaver et al. (2007) found that ex-felon students were uncomfortable disclosing their criminal histories due to shame, anxiety, and others’ negative reactions. Their participants reported that their transitions to college were difficult, and that they felt the need to
hide their pasts, their relationships with other felons, and their prison tattoos (Copenhaver et al., 2007).

**Special admissions processes and criminal stigma.** Veysey, Martinez, and Christian (2009) described criminal stigma as a moral blemish that enables potential employers or property owners to look at ex-offenders as unable to be trusted. According to Copenhaver et al. (2007), whether this stigma against inmates upon their release is real or merely perceived, it “is enough to keep many from developing social, professional or educational ties and seeking life enhancing opportunities” (p. 268). Denial of financial aid can perpetuate the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness for ex-offenders. Indeed, “denial of aid constitutes a blow against the individual, their families and their communities. . . . A college degree can be the difference between a successful taxpaying member in the middle class and a person suffering long-term dependence on government assistance” (Cardman, 2008, p. 2).

**Special admissions processes and policy.** Copenhaver et al. (2007) encouraged policies that might better support ex-felon students such as the creation of support groups and assistance teams. By default, such policies would require a special admissions process to identify those students and may justify the use of such a process (Custer, 2012; Weissman, Rosenthal, Warth, Wolf, & Messina-Yauchzy, 2010). It is imperative to practice sensitivity when requesting information about criminal history to use for student support purposes as the special admissions process may further marginalize ex-offender applicants, particularly by intensifying racial discrimination (Custer, 2012).

Custer (2012) researched the criminal history self-disclosure of 54 ex-felon undergraduates who applied to a public, four-year university in the Midwest between the fall of 2009 and the winter of 2011. He found that applicants in special admissions processes tended to
write about their criminal pasts as regrettable choices; higher education as an opportunity for themselves, their families, and society; and about successes in other areas of their lives for admission consideration (Custer, 2012). A few of Custer’s (2012) participants expressed religious reasons for pursuing higher education and attributed rehabilitation success to their faith.

Custer (2012) concluded that special admissions processes did not necessarily make campuses safer (at least not this campus during this time period) and that process was upsetting for some applicants. He specifically noted that although there were 978 violations of university policies during the 2010-2011 academic year, none of the 34 applicants admitted had any conduct infractions for violations of campus policies during that period (Custer, 2012). While Custer (2012) concluded that the special admissions process was likely a neutral one for most ex-offenders, he did note that a sizeable minority expressed frustration, anger, and other negative attitudes toward subjection to special admissions and requirement to disclose a criminal history they were afraid would keep them from consideration for admission.

One landmark study reviewed the admissions practices of 273 institutions, colleges, and universities when dealing with applicants who have criminal records (Weissman, Rosenthal, Warth, Wolf, & Messina-Yauchzy, 2010). Weissman et al. (2010) found that 66% percent of the institutions collected information on applicant’s criminal histories; that the primary means for requesting the information was for the completion of criminal background checks; that most institutions did initiate special admissions processes after learning of the criminal history; that few of the institutions had crafted policies or trained staff on how to deal with applicants with criminal convictions; that many criminal convictions were viewed negatively; and finally, that most of the institutions had implemented supports or provided supervision to ex-felon students. In order to best provide such support to ex-offender students in the future, Custer (2012) recommended that
researchers and practitioners attempt to learn more about community perceptions, the experiences of applicants with felony convictions, and the experiences of students with felony convictions—the last of which I have attempted to do in this research.

Summary

The education of ex-offenders has marked promise for the rehabilitation of criminal offenders pre- and post-release. Despite the restrictions on ex-offenders and the increase of collateral sanctions following the “tough on crime” movement, recent philosophic and economic shifts have led to serious discussions related to prisoner reentry. To best create policies that are effective for the purpose of promoting criminal reform, criminal justice researchers and practitioners must be well-informed about the demographic, educational, recidivism, and faith characteristics of incarcerated adults. Since the benefits of higher education for both individuals and society are well-documented, future investigations ought to investigate such non-traditional student subpopulations as ex-offenders and how higher education benefits them.

This summary of the relevant literature on higher education and correctional populations—particularly ex-offenders where possible—was designed to help correctional education researchers and practitioners understand the broader context in which they operate. Gaps in the literature on the campus experiences of ex-offender populations transitioning into, through, and out of higher education on a Christian liberal arts campus persist. This study not only fills part of this existing gap in the research literature, but it furthers expands the horizons of what is known about the lived experiences of ex-offenders transitioning into, through, and out of higher education on Christian liberal arts campuses.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Restated, the purpose of this research was to gain a greater understanding about the experiences of ex-felon students on a Christian liberal arts campus in an attempt to determine the support they have experienced during their transitions into, through, and out of higher education as well as the actual forms that support may have taken. For example, one objective was to ascertain whether Wheaton College supplemented the substantial financial provision the Institute for Prison Ministries granted these students through the Colson Scholarship program with non-monetary supports to aid them in persisting unto graduation. This study, then, encompassed the experiences of Colson Scholar participants as they moved into, through, and out of their higher education transitions, but also incorporated their perceptions of their assets and liabilities, coping strategies, disclosure experiences, and educational outcomes throughout the post-secondary transition process.

Qualitative Inquiry

Since the inquiry focused on participants’ perceptions and explanations of their lived college experiences, it required the utilization of a qualitative methodology and the employment of methods available within the qualitative research tradition (Patton, 2002). Suskie (2009) wrote that although qualitative assessments tended to be “underused and underappreciated . . . they help discover problems—and solutions—that can’t be found through quantitative assessments alone” (p. 19). Thus, categorical survey responses on a quantitative survey may actually restrict participants’ abilities to explain their experiences outside of the offered selections, so that quantitative researchers may fail to capture the very essence of their lived experiences.

While quantitative research certainly has its place, it is not an appropriate research tradition for learning the experiences of ex-offender students of higher education. Not only is
quantitative research methodologically ill-equipped to elicit rich descriptions of phenomena, quantitative analyses are generally predicated on larger sample sizes than what is available here. Using quantitative means to study a qualitative phenomenon often results in the marginalization of individual experiences and the deletion of outliers. Accordingly, only results deemed “significant” by a pre-determined p-value are typically given weighty consideration. Unfettered by such constraints, the qualitative methodological tradition more appropriately gives voice to the nuances of individualized expressions of experience, views every student’s story as worthy to be told, and considers all experiences relevant to the topic under study to be equally significant.

Finally, unless quantitative survey designs have undergone extensive pre-testing with focus groups or are at least grounded in prior research or theory, this type of research generally supplies best-guess response categories and then observes at a distance as participants struggle to filter themselves into one pre-supplied response or another (or are relegated to the nebulous “Other” category which may or may not offer respondents an opportunity to provide a qualitative description of their varied contributions). Contrarily, qualitative research allows the themes, then codes, then categories, to grow from the participants’ responses, not the researcher’s speculations of what the categories are or should be. Rather than the distant objectivity of quantitative methods, the personal interviewing methods of qualitative research allow for growth toward understandings of unique experience and the provision of thick description (Creswell, 2013).

Since the issue under investigation in this study was an attempt to learn the experiences of people, particularly ex-felon students in higher education, the best research tradition to pursue this study was the qualitative tradition in that it allows for the incorporation of methods that enable researchers to best learn the breadth and depth of their participants’ lived experiences.
Post-Positivism’s Epistemology, Ontology, and Axiology

Although some have framed paradigmatic categories differently, one grid through which to understand the paradigms most commonly associated with qualitative research methods is Creswell’s (2013) identification of four categories of worldviews behind the paradigms: post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. Philosophers have established these paradigms depending on basic philosophical assumptions regarding researchers’ epistemology (how the researcher believes something is known or learned), ontology (how the researcher understands the nature of reality), and axiology (how the researcher believes values should guide the research) (Creswell, 2013).

Since I find myself solidly positioned in the post-positivist paradigm, I would like to explain what that means and how it could have influenced the research. There are three post-positivism tenets evidenced in the proposed qualitative inquiry, and the first relates to the researcher’s values, or axiology. Axiologically, post-positivists believe in the “value-ladenness of inquiry” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). That is, in post-positivist research, the researcher’s values inevitably influence the research questions and outcomes. Similarly, the study I conducted was not possible to divorce from my values as to what matters are worthy of investigation. In the following section, I explain exactly how my values as a Christian, as a higher education practitioner, and as a criminal justice practitioner could have influenced the topic under discussion if measures were not taken to suspend such value-driven preconceptions to the extent possible (in a process called bracketing, explained later in the chapter).

In addition to the role preexistent values play in the research process, the second tenet Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) mentioned is related to epistemology, or how researchers come to know what they know. Post-positivists believe in the “theory-ladenness of facts,” meaning that
research, in general, is inevitably influenced by the theory, hypotheses, or framework investigators use (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). Simply stated, valuing *a priori* theory (theory utilized before the investigation occurs and the findings are issued) and allowing that theory to inform a study’s methodological design is a post-positivist concept (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Plack, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). The *a priori* theory that provides the framework for this research study, Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory, is explained in detail throughout the remainder of this study.

Finally, the third tenet of post-positivism refers to its ontology, or the nature of our understanding of reality as constructed. I function on the ontological assumption that individuals come to believe the things they believe for many reasons, one of those being the pressure of the totality of a multitude of influences upon them, particularly throughout their childhoods. As they age, they continue to construct reality by becoming more familiar with the known, increasingly interacting with the unknown, and identifying ways in which to integrate the unknown into the world of the known, so that the known becomes a larger and larger body of familiar places, people, and/or events as well as more abstract conceptualizations. Therein, individuals construct their understandings of reality throughout their lifespans. Unlike social constructivism’s tenet, post-positivism does not hold that there are multiple realities, just that there are multiple imperfect apprehensions of a singular reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Some of the concepts related to post-positivism, particularly as it pertains to the current research, may be easiest understood if I situate myself and the background of my paradigmatic assumptions in light of my identity as a researcher.
Researcher Positionality, Reflexivity and Bracketing/Epoché

Positionality refers to how I positioned myself in the research study; reflexivity conveys my acknowledged biases. In order to convey genuine positionality and true reflexivity in my particular research, I choose to share a portion of my background and thoughts regarding the phenomenon under examination. I seek to be fully transparent as to why this topic interested me, and to give more background about that here, both from a faith-based perspective, a criminal justice practitioner perspective, and a higher education practitioner perspective.

As a Christian. All people hold presuppositions, whether or not they admit to having them, and my presuppositional position begins with the belief that the Bible is true. Rushdoony (1976) argued that “all thinking rests on pre-theoretical and essentially religious presuppositions about reality which either affirm or deny the God of Scripture” (p. 32). Belief in God is an intellectually defensible position—meaning I can provide a rationale as to why I do believe—and it is equally presuppositional to suggest that God does not exist, or that the Bible is not true, as it is to presume the reverse. That is, either option is equally valid because both are ultimately accepted by faith. These “presuppositions one brings to experience, be they Christian or non-Christian, shape the understanding. Experience is not self-interpreting” (Holmes, 1987, p. 91). Gill (1997) argued that individuals should examine these functional frameworks and called it unethical to “deny one’s own religious/moral identity and pretend to be above all normative conviction” to please those who would desire researchers to leave their identities at the door (p. 145). Since I placed my faith in Christ alone at 19 years of age, it is impossible for me to divorce that experience and my understanding of the Christian Scriptures from the important questions of knowledge, reality, and values, as well as my understanding of the questions about ex-offenders that are the foci of this study.
Ontologically, I believe that God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity in two distinct ways. Natural revelation refers to facts about God revealed through the natural world (His orderliness, creativity, etc.); supernatural revelation refers to God’s revelation of Himself through the Bible (His holiness, love, etc.). I concur with Berkhof and van Til (1990) that “only when ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ revelation are seen thus to supplement one another, is man placed in his proper historical perspective. . . . God has given man a project in which he is to be engaged . . . to think God’s thoughts after Him” (pp. 41-44). Understanding this project gives the student’s educational experiences elevated significance. It is for this reason that I believe that an education that never addresses the tensions that a student’s faith (or non-faith in the case of agnostics and atheists) places upon a particular topic of learning cannot be considered holistic in nature.

The Christian Scriptures speak authoritatively about the nature of the learner as a created being. The doctrines of creation and providence “imply that God originates and arranges all the facts of the universe according to a ‘logic’ that is above man. . . . God who is self-existent and self-contained . . . [and provides] the goal, the standards and the motivating principle of life” (van Til, 1954, pp. 39-40). I believe that learned facts share an inherent unity with one another because they reflect precisely that logic of the Creator-God (Dockery, 2007). Of course, those who do not believe in the God of the Christian Scriptures can still discover truth: “Unbelieving scholars may not know the source or nature of truth, but the truth they discover is still God’s truth” (Reimer, 1991, p. 208). God did not desire thoughtless automatons or else He would have created them. On the contrary, humankind is free to experience all His goodness and exercise their free wills to accept or reject His love for them. Although it is possible to learn and discover knowledge without knowing or acknowledging God, I firmly believe that such an “education” misses the point of all education, the purpose and beauty of learning who God is and the awe and wonder of
what He has done. For this reason, I believe the purpose of education is learning to love, worship, and glorify God as we learn more about Him, both indirectly and directly, through both natural and supernatural means.

Since I am deeply committed to the Christian faith, I come to this project with some of my own understandings of what it means to be a Christian living through this transition. If I exchange my participants’ responses with my own ideas, however, the research is unsound and unethical. Subsequently, I had to listen actively to my participants and their interpretations of reality in order to grasp their perspectives—and bracket my own perceptions in the process—in order to do justice to their experiences. Identifying and then carefully suspending my preconceived notions occurred through processes called epoché and bracketing, respectively, discussed in detail in the data analysis and synthesis section (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014).

**As a criminal justice practitioner.** Although I have never been the victim of any serious crime, I have spent over a decade of my career in the field of criminal justice as first an Emergency Dispatcher, then as a Corrections Officer for adults in a county jail, and later as a Juvenile Corrections Officer at a juvenile detention facility. I have always believed that the only real difference between me and the people I kept watch over in the jail were the color and cut of our uniforms—and on occasion I told them so.

Since I believe what the Christian Scriptures say about the nature of humanity, I believe that all humans are sinners. Humanity is hopelessly steeped in rebellious sin against God’s authority, for which the penalty is physical death and spiritual death forever. The only way out of this predicament is to have someone who is without sin exchange our death for His life, our sins for His righteousness. Otherwise, we remain guilty. This substitute had to be God in order to be sinless and had to be human in order to be able to die in our place. Jesus Christ was both fully
God and fully man—God incarnate—and I believe that He did die for us whether or not we choose to accept it.

Crime and sin are, at their most basic level, no different in my eyes. Meaning, I believe that crimes are generally sins that society has placed into a penal code, and conversely, sin is typically the name we give our individual crimes when we are thinking about them against the backdrop of a holy God. Also consistent with the Christian Scriptures, I believe that humanity perpetrated sin/crime against God long before it was committed against our fellow humanity (Genesis 3). With those thoughts offered, it is worth noting that they are generalizations. In other words, crime is not necessarily always also a sin, for we in our collective fallen humanity occasionally create and pass unjust laws, a belief I previously discussed.

Examples of tensions surrounding unjust laws include Daniel 3 (Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego refused to bow to worship the king’s image as their worship belong solely to God), Daniel 6 (Daniel refused to cease praying to God when such praying was forbidden by the king), and Acts 4:19 and 5:29 (Jesus’ apostles refused to heed the government’s command that they not speak or teach in Jesus’ name). Some may offer the modern example of slavery in the US, subsequent unjust segregation laws, and the arrests of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., although the appropriate application of civil disobedience in extra-biblical cases is debated. According to the Christian Scriptures, God has ordained (even imperfect) governing authorities and unless man-made laws are unjust to the extent that those being governed must violate God’s laws or their biblically-informed consciences before God in order to obey them, then the man-made laws ought to be obeyed (for an excellent discussion of these tensions, conditions, and principles, see Cone, 2012). Given the noted exceptions, then, I believe that crime and sin are virtually synonymous.
Loathsome laws ought to energize those governed to seek positive legislative, electoral, and/or administrative change through persuasion within a democratic and civilized process.

This belief means a few things for my understanding of this study. First, I believe a law-abiding society, all things being equal, owes lawbreakers very little. Lawbreakers have made choices—despite potential histories of victimization and abuse—and those choices require consequences. The fact that I support the idea of spending time, effort, energy, financial resources, and more on offenders and ex-offenders who want to pursue a change is not because I want to be “soft on crime.” The Bible is clear in its justice balance: “For the one in authority [the government or law enforcement official] is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:1-7 New International Version).

However, since God has been so gracious and merciful with me, I want to deal in the same manner with my fellow humanity for they were also created in His image. Consider Micah 6:8, for example. There the prophet Micah, under the direction of the Holy Spirit wrote, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (The Bible, New International Version). So, although I do not believe spiritual conversion makes reentry programming unnecessary—the very idea is laughable—I do believe that an offender who has accepted Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior has the best chance out of any to succeed at his or her reentry transition. Even when faced with tremendous obstacles, I believe based on the Christian Scriptures that believers in Christ have an internal Holy Spirit fighting alongside, within, and for them.

Ultimately, I believe that crime is a moral problem, requiring a moral solution (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1998). Second, while I do believe that offering such a scholarship endeavor is indeed
noble, worthwhile, inspiring, and beneficial, I do not believe that it should be paid for by tax-
payer revenues (i.e., it should not be government-funded). I certainly applaud individuals who are
burdened to become and develop donors and communicate a message of sincere hope and change.
I just do not believe that victims of crime—who have already paid at least twice for crimes they
did not commit by experiencing the pain and suffering of the initial criminal act as well as having
to pay taxes to provide for the punishment of their abusers—should be further ravaged through
additional tax increases to pay for their convicted perpetrators’ educations. I certainly believe in
the value of such a program; I just do not believe that free society ought to be mandated to pay for
the choices of its criminals more than they already are. I believe that if correctional education
administrators need funding, then the onus is on them to deliver a compelling-enough message to
generate the necessary level of private funding flow to sustain their programs. Privately funded
scholarships like the Colson Scholarship are precisely the kinds of initiatives I would love to see
replicated, just by private donation and not by legal mandate (although I do support the ex-
offender provisions for federal student aid if ex-offenders qualify based on their financial need).

As a higher education practitioner. As an individual earning a doctoral degree in higher
education administration from a program that specializes in student affairs, I have interests in this
project that are outside of the aforementioned faith-related and criminal justice-related spheres.
Since my research interests include the experiences of former and current correctional populations
as they attempt to obtain their college degrees, the opportunity to study this unique Colson
Scholarship and what it means to the ex-felons who receive it is an exciting proposition for me as
a researcher. My work with non-traditional and transfer students, faculty, and other higher
education professionals has reminded me of just how much there is to learn from justice-involved
individuals. The experiences of these ex-felons attempting to pursue higher education intrigued
me because of the radical internal changes these decisions reflect when juxtaposed against their former choices to pursue lives of crime. These ex-offender students’ decisions to pursue higher education will undoubtedly have great ramifications for their lives, the lives of their families and friends, and the good of society as well as provide rich fodder for investigative impulse.

Ex-offenders come to campus with their own multicultural experiences, their own views of social justice, their own experiences of educational environments, victims and victimization, the criminal justice system, and basic human fairness. Our privileged silos, ivory towers, and hallowed halls would be well-served by the arrival of a group of serious ex-offender students whose scholarship and experiences are sure to enrich our classrooms, expand our horizons, challenge our preconceptions, and present us with opportunities to put into action theories that are too often only contemplated in higher education. They know well the challenges that awaited them when they attempted to reenter society and the feelings of social stigma that a college education may work to mitigate.

Throughout this reflexivity process I have attempted to acknowledge what I know and believe about crime and offenders (practicing epoché and then bracketing so that my biased beliefs touch the narrative as little as possible and only when permitted to do so). This approach should allow me to attempt to come at this endeavor with somewhat of an open mind, although as a post-positivist, I understand that it is not possible to be completely rid myself of all bias.

**My Paradigmatic Assumptions**

In summary, I have different paradigmatic leanings depending upon the particular aspect in question, but overall I am a post-positivist. I believe in absolute Truth according to the Christian Scriptures (and therefore begin assessing myself as a positivist). However, I do also believe that individuals all perceive that Truth and their experiences differently and incompletely
(creating a social interactionism leaning that justifies the claim of operating from a post-positivist paradigm). However, because I believe that Truth (with a capital “T”) still exists despite humans’ multiple interpretations of it, I cannot be a strict constructivist/social interactionist. Ultimately, I believe that while researchers should seek to limit bias as much as possible, I readily acknowledge that it is not possible to remove all bias. This recognition of bias disqualifies me as a true positivist (and thus, again, I identify as a post-positivist).

As a point of epistemological, ontological, and axiological clarity, I do not believe that members of the academy are creating new knowledge in their research, but are rather discovering new knowledge. We may put knowledge together in fresh ways or package knowledge in new ways or uncover new developments; but the knowledge itself is not new as I believe that all the thoughts we think are thoughts that God’s singular reality undergirds and even makes possible. It is through my lens created by these philosophical assumptions that I believe that uncovering and capturing ex-felons’ perspectives on accessing higher education have great import for the improvement of experiences for all ex-offenders considering such a pursuit. Although personal values drive my paradigm, that is to be expected; again, the first tenet of the post-positivist paradigm is an axiological one—that the researcher’s values inevitably influence the research inquiry (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). So although personal values may drive the choice of paradigm, the research design’s appropriateness of fit to answer the research questions drove the phenomenological methodology and the methods employed.

**Phenomenological Methodology**

Creswell (2007) wrote that phenomenology is the methodology of choice when “the type of problem . . . is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon . . . in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a
deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (p. 60). The scope of this project, then, justified the decision to pursue a phenomenological research design since it appeared to be the most appropriate methodology to ascertain the experiences of ex-offenders and their moving into, through, and out of higher education. Phenomenological methodology was chosen for these reasons as well as its ability to produce a high level of rich, thick description as well as its ability to provide me with a vehicle through which the research questions in the study could logically be answered—to the extent shared experiences did exist among participants (Creswell, 2013).

Although I and other phenomenologists value the contributions of past philosophers and researchers—like Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre—who introduced and expanded the study of phenomenology, that is not to say that their work was infallible and incapable of improvement. On the contrary, later researchers have clarified theoretical inconsistencies or at times refined their own previously introduced contributions in ways that were designed to develop our understanding of phenomenological methodology, its methods, and its application (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). As a result, my citation of these researchers should not be understood as a blanket endorsement of the entirety of their literature on phenomenology, nor should readers assume that they are consistent with each other or even within their own earlier and later written work on the matters (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Racher & Robinson, 2003a). These phenomenological pioneers are permitted to expand, revise, and reiterate their thinking and the field is better for their having done so.

With that being said, van Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1994), whose work I cite, are not to be understood as phenomenologists from the post-positivist paradigm. They rather hail from the social-constructivist (sometimes also called interpretive) paradigm. Although they have much to contribute to overall understandings of phenomenology, some of what they have to say is at
odds with the basic assumptions of the post-positivist paradigm. Creswell (2007) aptly noted the inconsistency, asserting that “bracketing personal experiences may be difficult for the [constructivist] researcher to implement. An interpretive approach to phenomenology would signal [bracketing] as an impossibility” (p. 62). Post-positivist assumptions and phenomenological methods are entirely congruent (Racher & Robinson, 2003a).

In order to align a post-positivist paradigm with a phenomenological methodology, it is helpful to rely on the work of prior post-positivist phenomenologists. The earliest and most well-known is Merleau-Ponty, known for “Merleau-Pontian phenomenology” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). (For a masterful handling of the alignment of Husserlian, Heideggerian, and Merleau-Pontian phenomenologies with the basic assumptions of the post-positivist paradigm, see Racher & Robinson, 2003a).

Merleau-Pontian (1962) phenomenology places its emphasis on perceptions, bodily interaction with the world, and subjectivity. Although individual perceptions of reality are at the heart of this post-positivist brand of phenomenology, it is precisely in the fact that it is post-positivist in stripe that the perceptions are recognized for their inability to be comprehensive (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In addition, researchers who hold to post-positivist phenomenological methodology view participants and themselves as incapable of fully understanding the inexhaustible world in which they live and perceive (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Racher and Robinson (2003a) contributed the following explanation of Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) positionality in terms of his ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions about the research process:

Merleau-Ponty is on the periphery of philosophical hermeneutics (constructivism) but holds many of the perspectives of Husserl (positivism). He believed that the essence of a
phenomenon is reality, but essence cannot be fully known (modified realism). . . .

Consideration of the philosophical assumptions advocated by Merleau Ponty suggests that his perspective shares many similarities with post-positivism. . . . For example, reality exists before our consciousness and is perceived by our consciousness . . . [but] reality is only imperfectly apprehendable, and unobservables have the capacity of explaining the functioning of observable data. The researcher is not detached from the inquiry and indeed shapes the research process. The goal of research may be description, understanding, explanation, and/or prediction. (pp. 474-475)

Thus, phenomenology’s reliance on multiple philosophical traditions legitimately placed the methodology into any of the four research paradigms, and certainly is not incongruent with post-positivism in particular (Annells, 1999; Rolfe, 2006). For example, Racher and Robinson (2003a) wrote that “phenomenology and post-positivism may appear to be strange bedfellows, but on closer scrutiny they need not be conceptualized as separate entities but may be recognized for having some similarities and shared perspectives” (p. 465). Clark (1998) also held that phenomenology was an appropriate method of post-positivist research.

Indeed researchers readily acknowledge post-positivist phenomenology’s strong ties to its positivist roots and understood the phenomenology of certain philosophers to have had post-positivist leanings or to have fallen distinctly into post-positivist paradigms. For example, Racher and Robinson (2003a) elaborated that “many of the assumptions that underpin a postpositive perspective, particularly as it has evolved, are similar to the philosophy of phenomenology in general and the stance of Merleau-Ponty in particular” (Racher & Robinson, 2003a, p. 475). Likewise, Rolfe (2006) wrote that “Husserlian phenomenology is now an established and well respected methodology. . . . It is also usually (and perhaps wrongly) described as emanating from
the naturalist/interpretivist tradition, whereas in fact it has far more in common with positivism and/or post-positivism” (p. 307).

Rolfe (2006) also cited Polit & Hungler in his discussion: “The phenomenologist investigates subjective phenomena in the belief that essential truths about reality are grounded in people’s lived experiences” (p. 307), and posited that the balance in this statement between “subjective phenomena” and “essential truths about reality” reveals certain ontological and epistemological assumptions that are inherent within phenomenological methodology and are genuinely post-positivist in nature. As Racher and Robinson (2003a) contended, “Although an essence is not generalizable from a sample to a population, which is characteristic of positivism, the universality of an essence depicts common understanding that is consistent with post-positivism” (p. 476). Ultimately Racher and Robinson (2003b) concluded a rejoinder defending their position with the following statement:

an overlap or intersect between the two is apparent, a position that is not new. . . . The amount of overlap may be greater for some and less for others depending upon the assumptions that underpin their practice and their research. . . . Our purpose is to create space at the intersect to offer possibilities (no single paradigm) to those who find no place in either of the more extreme mutually exclusive positions. (p. 489)

Like Merleau-Ponty and other post-positivist phenomenologists, I understand a singular overarching reality or truth, humans’ fractured ability to understand that singular truth, and the role of my values related to the research as incapable of being unbiased, although I consistently attempted to be as unbiased as possible and own those biases wherever applicable. My alignment with post-positivist phenomenology in general, and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology in particular, is detailed in Figure 1.
Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) Philosophical Assumptions
Identifying His Phenomenology
As Post-Positivist

Similar Philosophical Assumptions Supporting
My Post-Positivist Phenomenology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) Philosophical Assumptions</th>
<th>Similar Philosophical Assumptions Supporting My Post-Positivist Phenomenology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher is not detached from the inquiry, but rather shapes the research process</td>
<td>Researcher is incapable of being unbiased; values inevitably influence inquiry although we should attempt to acknowledge, identify, and disclose them as fully as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence of a phenomenon is reality; reality exists before our consciousness and is perceived by our consciousness</td>
<td>Single overarching Reality/Truth perceived and interpreted (both imperfectly, or at least incompletely) by our consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World within which participants and researchers perceive is inexhaustible; as a result, their perceptions are incapable of being comprehensive</td>
<td>Multiple perceptions or interpretations of that singular reality; humanity has a fractured ability to fully understand that Reality/Truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description, Understanding, Explanation, and/or Prediction</td>
<td>Exploration, Discovery, Understanding, and/or Explanation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Interpretive Theoretical Framework**

The primary theoretical framework I used in this study is Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984; Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Schlossberg (1984) theorized about the nature of transitions, how individuals move through transitions in their lives, and steps
these individuals could take to ease their transition process (such as seeking supports they might need). Essentially, Schlossberg (1984) defined a transition as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 39). For individuals involved in particular events during the transition process, meaning is made through experiencing the type of transitional event (anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent), the context of the transitional event (including its relationship to the transition and setting), and its impact (the extent to which the event or overall transition affects daily routines) (Anderson et al., 2012). The experience of this transition process consists of the individual’s reactions over time as they move into, move through, and move out of a transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

The process of “moving in” to a transition can be a difficult one because the experience an individual is transitioning into is typically replete with rules, norms, customs, behaviors, and expectations of the individual to which he or she is not accustomed (Anderson et al., 2012). Similarly, moving “through” a situation comes with its own challenges, as the individual must learn to adapt and cope with the environment and peer groups of the new experience while seeking balance and support in the challenge that the transition brought (Anderson et al., 2012). Finally, as the individual moves “out” of the transition, there can be a sense of identity and belonging that the individual found during the transition that may be lost or left behind as they transition into the new beginning and close the previous chapter. Thus, mixed emotions throughout the process of planning for the next transition characterize this final stage (Anderson et al., 2012).

In terms of how individuals cope with these transitions, Schlossberg (1984) theorized that individuals each have assets and liabilities that influence them in relation to the following four factors: situation, self, supports, and strategies (referred to as the four Ss of Schlossberg’s theory).
The first classification, *situation*, is highly contextual and characterized by unique aspects such as the trigger for the transition, the timing when the transition occurs, the extent of control the individual has or does not have over the transition, the individual’s change of role during the transition, the duration of the transition, an individual’s prior experience of a similar transition, stress that runs concurrently with the transition in the individual’s life, and the individual’s assessment of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). In terms of *self*, all people moving in, through, and out of transitions are unique in their personal and demographic characteristics, their psychological resources, and their individual assets and liabilities (Anderson et al., 2012). *Supports* during the transition, most often social supports such as family, friendships, and networks, can come in many types, serve many functions, and be measured in different ways (Anderson et al., 2012). Finally, each individual develops basic *strategies* from which he or she manages his or her relationship to the transition, such as various categories and modes of coping strategies (Anderson et al., 2012).

This richly developed theoretical framework seemed particularly apt for this research study since these participants had each moved in, through, and out of many similar transitions although their situations, selves, supports, and strategies may have varied significantly (Anderson et al., 2012). For example, in their pasts these scholarship recipients were all free non-criminals at some point in their youths. At some point—albeit varying for each individual—they had all chosen to commit a felony (at least one and in some cases perhaps more than one) and were caught and processed through the criminal justice system, having been convicted and sentenced to some amount of time to serve in a correctional institution. At some point, either prior to release or post-release, each individual came to learn of the availability of the scholarship. To meet the Colson Scholarship eligibility requirements, each of these scholarship applicants had to self-
identify as a Christian, spend at least a year out of prison, and be established at a local church for at least a year before making application to the program. At some point, each participant applied and was accepted into the scholarship program. Finally, each individual accepted the scholarship and entered an undergraduate academic program at this private Christian liberal arts college.

Despite the similarities shared by the Colson Scholarship recipients, each individual is unique in his understanding and the experiences through which he has passed to arrive at that same nexus, that is, making-meaning of transitioning into, thorough, and out of higher education as ex-felons. Colson Scholars each have unique contexts as to what triggered their initial crimes, what else was going on in their lives, the extent to which they had control over the circumstances in which they became involved, their roles in the incident(s), the extent to which they identified as both criminal and victim, their stories of how they came to transition into higher education, how they have made meaning out of their pasts and come to terms with the crimes they have committed, how they view the transition the victim has had to make, the assets and liabilities they had in place to navigate the transition process into higher education, the supports they had to aid their return to society following the college experience, and what coping mechanisms they would point to as having strengthened them during the transition out of higher education and back into society.

Although these aspects are many and some were outside of the scope of this study, contemplating these possibilities informed the research questions and provided a rich source of data and inquiry for a semi-structured interview. This theoretical framework was a virtual breeding ground for additional questions for the interview protocol (see Appendices A & B). In terms of the aforementioned research questions, I was most interested in the ex-offenders’
transitions moving into, through, and out of higher education, and these research questions are reiterated below for review.

**Research Questions**

The foci of this particular qualitative methodological inquiry were the lived experiences of ex-felons who access higher education after receiving the Colson Scholarship. I pursued this formal study in order to investigate the following specific research questions:

**RQ1:** What do Colson Scholars say are the personal assets and liabilities that affected their post-secondary experiences?

**RQ2:** What coping strategies do Colson Scholars say they employed during their transitions into, through, and out of their higher education experiences?

**RQ3:** What factors do Colson Scholars report influenced their decisions to either disclose or not disclose their ex-offender status, and what were their experiences when they chose to disclose?

**RQ4:** What do Colson Scholars report are the outcomes of their overall higher education experiences?

**RQ5:** In what ways do Colson Scholars believe that Wheaton College supported them, or could have been of more support to them, during their transitions into, through, and out of higher education?

The rationale for the selection and formulation of these five research questions was borne out of the four Ss of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory as well as extended contemplation on the research problem. In relation to the first “S”, self, much exists in the literature regarding both the challenges that offenders who pursue higher education within prisons experience (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Contardo & Tolbert, 2008; Brazzell et al., 2009) as well as the challenges that
ex-offenders face reentering the community following incarceration (Rose & Clear, 2001; Petersilia, 2003). However neither of these emphases captures how those ex-offenders reentering society and subsequently attempting higher education see themselves and their suitability, in terms of strengths and weaknesses, to meet such demands. Schlossberg’s (1984) framework provided a revised nomenclature (i.e., “assets” and “liabilities”) to get at this portion of the phenomenon, those advantages and disadvantages that are most salient for these participants as they moved into, through, and out of these higher education transitions.

The second research question corresponded with Schlossberg’s (1984) strategies. The primary reason for asking interview questions related to this portion of Schlossberg’s (1984) theory and honing in on this aspect of participants’ explanations of their experiences was in order to demonstrate the Scholars’ manners of coping with the stressors they described encountering while moving into, through, and out of their higher education experiences. Learning the coping mechanisms employed by this group of underrepresented students in higher education can perhaps provide unique and previously unknown insights into how they adapt to pressures surrounding their higher education experiences.

The next research question was grounded in Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory in her “S” called situation. Although situation was historically intended to reveal the situation surrounding the transition itself (timing, trigger, role shifts, etc.), I was most interested in understanding the situations surrounding participants’ disclosure of their criminal pasts rather than the nature of the crimes that caused them to be ex-felons attempting higher education or the triggers that causes those crimes to occur. Focused rather on the situation of their encounters with other students, faculty, and staff on Wheaton’s campus, I wanted to know what factors influenced
revelations of their criminal history of Colson Scholar status in those spaces, and conversely, what factors would keep them from disclosing such information when given opportunities to do so.

The fourth question was derived less from Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory than from the higher education literature, much of which I have already reviewed in the previous chapter. I created the fourth question in an attempt to inquire as to the educational outcomes for this post-correctional population of Colson Scholars following their experiences moving into, through, and out of higher education at Wheaton College. Understanding how these participants view the outcomes of their higher education experiences allows us to begin to question or extend the previous literature for this specific subpopulation of nontraditional students in higher education and may even expand what we know about the interaction between the two most significant predictors of recidivism success post-release: education and employment (Lockwood et al., 2012).

The final research question addressed the supports “S” of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory. Utilizing the theoretical framework to inform this question, my goal was to ascertain in what ways Wheaton College and the Colson Scholarship provided meaningful supports to the Scholar participants as they moved into, through, and out of higher education at Wheaton. This research question as formulated also addressed ways in which Wheaton College and the Colson Scholarship program, as perceived by the Colson Scholar participants, could have been more supportive to these participants as they traversed their higher education experiences.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2010), research questions such as these can be not only exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive, but also emancipatory, as they can serve to encourage social action about a particular phenomenon. The research process is reciprocally beneficial in nature and researchers owe participants the debt of honoring their words by telling
their stories and advocating for their interests where able to do so (Jones, 2002; Seidman, 2012). As a researcher, then, I should be asking, “What do I owe to those people who helped to get me where I am? What do I owe, if anything, to those who never had the chance to be where I was? What are the ethics and politics of the power of qualitative inquiry as they pertain to this particular study?” Indeed, the bonds uniting theory and praxis meet and are strengthened when the phenomenon is considered a “valid basis for practical action” (van Manen, 1990, p. 155). I looked for ways that I, in my individual contexts, could take practical action based on the implications of the research findings of this study to make a difference for this population in higher education.

van Manen (1990) contended that researchers needed fewer generalized theories, which he saw as too broad and slow to adapt to mutable circumstances, and rather needed more “theory of the unique . . . theory eminently suitable to deal with [the] particular[s]” (p. 155, italics in original). The same is true of work with higher education populations. Extant theories of adult education may be valuable to address broad groups of nontraditional students, but in light of van Manen’s (1990) suggestion, field researchers might be best engaged to hone in on a subpopulation (e.g., current correctional students or ex-offenders) and ask how our pedagogy (or andragogy) has changed in light of understanding that subpopulation’s campus experiences. van Manen (1990) challenged his readers that if they thought “of phenomenology as a kind of action-oriented research, then an intimacy between research and life immediately suggest[ed] itself. Phenomenological human science is not external, top-down, expert, or contract research. . . . Phenomenological engagement is always personal engagement” (p. 156). Although the post-positivist paradigm is not particularly and actively emancipatory in nature, by pairing it with the phenomenological methodology, I was able to design a study that enabled me to offer culminating
implications and suggestions for future research and practice in order to better advocate for ex-
carcerated populations accessing higher education.

**Research Setting and Context**

Identification of suitable research locations for a study such as this one is often difficult. Ex-offenders are among the least represented students in higher education for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which are that they often struggle with significant financial limitations, they regularly report histories of substance abuse and/or mental health issues, and many are among the most poorly-educated in our society when they initially enter our correctional institutions (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Harlow, 2003; Leone et al., 2008). As a result they often sequester themselves, and even on campuses where ex-offenders may form a sizable-enough campus minority to make a study such as this one possible, it is often hard to identify “who’s who” in that the invisible stripes they bear are just that—invisible (LeBel, 2012). Additionally, Wheaton College is unique in that it was the only institution I found that offers a complete scholarship package to selected qualifying ex-felon applicants.

**Wheaton College.** The opportunity to conduct this study presented itself when I attended a conference on restorative justice and learned of this scholarship program for ex-felons at Wheaton College. Since the purpose of this study is to understand ex-felon student experiences surrounding the post-release transition into, through, and out of higher education, and since ex-felon graduates as a group could be located through the Colson Scholarship at Wheaton College, this study was by necessity delimited to Wheaton as the sole institution involved in the inquiry.

Wheaton College, in Wheaton, Illinois (not to be confused with the Wheaton College in Massachusetts), is a selective private residential interdenominational college founded in 1860 (Benne, 2001; Wheaton College, 2013a). The college operates beneath the auspices of the
following mission statement: “Wheaton College serves Jesus Christ and advances His Kingdom through excellence in liberal arts and graduate programs that educate the whole person to build the church and benefit society worldwide” (Wheaton College, 2013b, para. 2).

Benne (2001) considered Wheaton College an “orthodox” college in that it “establishes a baseline of creedal unanimity through its Statement of Faith, which assures solid Christian belief in the Wheaton community as much as humanly possible” (p. 106). Benne (2001) credited this aspect of Wheaton’s unifying evangelistic vision as the factor that has enabled the college “to successfully meld faith and learning [and] faith and action, through a unique blend of lively evangelical piety and rigorous Christian intellectuality that is actively modeled by its faculty and absorbed by many of its students” (p. 110).

Typical of other religious colleges in higher education, though, Wheaton has a variety of evangelical denominations represented on the board, among the faculty, and within the student body, as well as a few Catholic and Orthodox students (Benne, 2001). The college takes steps to assure an orientation toward evangelicalism among its core constituents, while allowing a certain measure of doctrinal diversity. According to Benne (2001), “Those who sign Wheaton’s statement hold a number of different theologies, practice different pieties and worship styles, and approach the faith and learning relationship in various ways” (p. 106). Members of Wheaton College’s Board of Trustees ensure the administration and faculty align with the college’s evangelical vision of “developing whole Christians . . . whose faith is not compartmentalized from their thinking and acting as they go out into the world” (Benne, 2001, p. 110).

Wheaton College enrolls approximately 2,500 undergraduates and 500 graduate students, 17% of whom are American ethnic minority students (Wheaton College, 2013a). Although many institutions are much more diverse, Wheaton does enjoy a measure of structural diversity among
its student body (whose members hail from all 50 US states and 42 distinct countries) (Wheaton College, 2013a). The college seems to value Christian ecumenism with students attending Wheaton from across over 55 different church denominations (Wheaton College, 2013a). Wheaton also is considered a top-ranked college by such prestigious entities as *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Kiplinger*, *The Princeton Review*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Insider’s Guide to the Colleges*, *Colleges that Change Lives*, *Forbes*, and *The Ultimate Guide to America’s Best Colleges* (Wheaton, 2013a). According to Wheaton College (2013a), 21% of Wheaton’s students in the 2012-2013 academic year were Pell Grant recipients, and based on a four-year tuition scale at the current rate, Colson Scholars’ total financial award is over a $150,000 value.

**Chuck Colson.** Charles W. “Chuck” Colson served as Special Counsel to former President Richard Nixon. During the Watergate investigation and before a seven-month imprisonment on Watergate-related charges, Colson placed his faith in Jesus Christ and experienced a spiritual conversion he described as being “born again” (Colson Center, 2015). Colson’s prison experiences led him to found Prison Fellowship in 1976, as well as advocate for criminal justice reform through Justice Fellowship created in 1983 (Colson Center, 2015). Colson’s greatest successes are often seen as advocacy for the religious rights of the incarcerated including increased access to religious programming for all prisoners, championing alternative punishments for low-level non-violent offenders, and lobbying legislators to pass the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 (Colson Center, 2015).

According to several participants, when a couple offered to donate funds to Wheaton for the establishment of this scholarship in the mid-1980s, Chuck Colson initially refused to have the scholarship named after him. However, the participants explained that the couple refused to endow the scholarship if Colson did not attach his name to the venture, and so that the scholarship
could be established, Colson acquiesced. The Charles W. Colson Scholarship was born, and from the program’s inception in 1988 to Colson’s death in 2012, participants reported that Colson enjoyed connection to the scholarship that bears his name and continues his post-conversion legacy.

**Colson Scholarship.** I had never heard of a similar program of this magnitude—at a religiously-affiliated institution or elsewhere—which essentially pays for ex-felon scholarship recipients’ full four-year college education. Generally tuition, room, board, and medical insurance are covered by the scholarship while transportation, personal miscellaneous expenses, and books are not covered, a critical contribution for students who likely have no alternative means of such support.

The reason for delineating Christian ex-felons throughout this study is simply because applicants must be Christians to apply for the scholarship. Ex-offenders must also be felons to apply and the only felons not considered for the scholarship are felony arsonists, felony sexual offenders, habitual violent offenders, and felony offenders under psychiatric care or taking anti-psychotic medications. Other requirements include US citizenship, release from jail or prison for at least one full year, establishment in a local church, a high school diploma or GED, and ACT or SAT standardized test scores. Age is not a consideration in scholarship decision-making.

Applicants to the scholarship must also submit a completed application to the college, a 3-4 paragraph essay including the individual’s statement of faith, statement of goals, and statement of incarceration, waivers of permissions of access to scholarship files, incarceration and parole information releases, and three recommendations (i.e., one from the individual’s pastor, one from a professional, and one from a friend). The scholarship funds Scholars in any of Wheaton
College’s 40 majors programs, ranging from Art to Education and from Languages to Engineering (i.e., not just ministry majors).

It was vitally important to ask Colson Scholar participants their experiences and opinions surrounding the phenomenon of this scholarship so that the lessons learned from their experiences can be applied with other groups of ex-felon correctional students where appropriate. Therefore, I sought to uncover what receiving a full scholarship to a Christian liberal arts college meant for the ex-felons who received it. That is, this research project was designed to aid in our understanding of former felons’ perceptions and experiences related to their attending higher education at a Christian liberal arts college on a full scholarship after release from incarceration.

**Research Sample and Data Sources**

Essentially, the sampling strategy for this study was criterion sampling. When target and accessible sample populations are small, criterion sampling allows all relevant cases to be chosen to create both the sampling frame and, sometimes even the entire sample, since the cases all meet the “criterion” (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the criterion was having been an ex-felon attending and persisting through a higher education program at the bachelor’s level at Wheaton College through the Colson Scholarship. In other words, all students who met the criteria of having earned a bachelor’s degree at Wheaton College through the Colson Scholarship were invited to participate in the study.

Current students were not chosen for this study because they have not yet moved out of the transition, meaning that they have not yet completed the third phase of Schlossberg’s (1984) cycle (i.e., “moving out” of higher education through degree attainment). In fact, non-completing Colson Scholar bachelor’s degree seekers (i.e., those who dropped out), were not considered as potential participants for the same reason, regardless of the length of their stay at Wheaton. That
is to say, since the transition is defined as completing (i.e., persisting through) the whole college experience, I excluded these non-completers. Completion of the moving out phase is a critical component that qualifies a would-be participant to reflect on the entirety of the experience and is wholly congruent with phenomenology as a methodology, which is at its core a thoughtful discovery that is retrospective by nature (van Manen, 1990). Participants would have had to move out of the transition in order to look back and adequately describe that final transitional phase.

Sample and Participant Selection

The first step in narrowing the participant pool was ascertaining how many ex-offenders received the scholarship since its inception in 1988 (the answer is approximately 40, and two of these have since passed away). The next step was determining how many of the ex-offender students who received the Colson scholarship attended the college for certificate, bachelors’, or master’s degrees (the scholarship was unavailable for doctoral students); the certificate-only and master’s students were then removed from the sample since the study is delimited to the experiences of students who accessed undergraduate education in an attempt to earn their bachelor’s degree. This delimitation left 23 possible participants who had been bachelor-level Colson Scholars since 1988. Current students and non-completers were then removed due to having not completed the “moving out” phase of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory.

Although the remaining 17 individuals completed their bachelor’s degree through the Colson Scholarship, the Wheaton College liaison reported not having any contact info for one potential participant. This left 16 potential participants, all of whom were men. Although the Colson Scholarship is open to women, there are very few women in the Colson Scholarship program in general, and none who met the selection criteria.
In order to invite each of the 16 bachelor-degree-completing Colson Scholars to participate in the study, the scholarship administrator at the college (who served as the liaison, or gatekeeper, for this project) contacted this subgroup of Scholars directly via email (Appendix C) and attached my research recruitment letter (Appendix D) and informed consent (Appendix E) form explaining the value of their responses to the research study, what they could expect regarding the nature of the research, the purpose of the study, their rights and responsibilities as participants, risks involved, and a pledge to protect their confidentiality. Private or potentially damaging information gleaned through the interviews was either deleted or disguised to protect the participants’ identities. The content of these three documents was carefully crafted in accordance with the research ethics protocols supported by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) and approved by the board prior to distribution. The entire project also received expedited approval by the board (BGSU Human Subjects Review Board’s initial and continuing approvals for the current study can be found in Appendices F & G).

Contacting potential participants through the institutional liaison seemed preferable since the institution was known to them but I, as the researcher, was unknown to them. More importantly, this also offered the best means of protecting the confidentiality of the sample. Contacting participants in this way allowed all who wished to participate to contact me directly (i.e., so that the liaison did not know which Colson Scholars chose to participate and so that I never knew any information about those who did not choose to participate). This precaution was taken so that the students would not misconstrue the email as attempting to coerce them to participate or that their participation was perhaps some type of additional post-scholarship obligation to the college. On the contrary, the informed consent portion of the packet reiterated
the voluntary nature of the study, the participants’ right to withdraw at any time without negative consequence, the risks and benefits involved in research participation, and the assurance of the potential participant’s confidentiality if he were to choose to participate.

Through the recruitment letters, sent mid-April 2014, I explained to participants how they could contact me in order to participate in the study if they chose to do so. One week after the first email, participants received a reminder email from the liaison reiterating the invitation to participate, again complete with a recruitment letter and informed consent form. Any participant who received the emailed materials and responded within two weeks was contacted to schedule an interview. The week the second email was sent, the final step in participant recruitment was launched. That is, a packet containing the same information (as Appendices C-E) was sent through the regular postal mail service as the third and final attempt to give potential participants an opportunity to respond, in case the emails had not been received.

Again, because of the confidentiality protocols, all 16 individuals were mailed the packet even if they had already been sent emails and agreed to interviews. This was, again, so that the liaison mailing the packets would not know which of the 16 had agreed to participate and so that I would not know any of the contact info of participants who chose not to contact me. Six of those potential participants invited agreed to participate; interviews (following the protocols in Appendices A & B) were scheduled over the following month. All data collection concluded by the third week of June 2014.

Prior to being contacted by my participants, I had expected that the total number of individual interviewees would fall somewhere between 6 and 8. Whereas Morse (1994) had urged no less than six participants be utilized in phenomenological research, Creswell (1998) held that five to 25 is an advisable number of participants in phenomenological research. This range of
6-8, but at least six, represented my ideal number of responses for this phenomenological study, considering the small number of participants that matched the criterion. Until the interviews were completed it was impossible to say whether or not redundancy had been reached, so initial expectations of participant totals were not based on that ideal.

**Data Collection Methods**

Once participant recruitment and selection had taken place, interview times and locations were arranged with the participants. A neutral and quiet location within 15 minutes of the participant’s home, suggested by the participant and mutually agreed upon by both parties, was chosen (with special consideration given to locations that encouraged openness, honesty, participant comfort, and ability to minimize issues of potential power differentials). Of the six participants, two chose a conference room at a local college, one chose his office after hours, one chose his office on a Saturday, one chose an empty apartment near his house for which he had a key, and one chose his home.

I began the interview by reviewing the informed consent form with the participant; I gave them another copy (in addition to the one they had already received over email as part of the recruitment materials) and read it aloud while the participant was expected to read along silently. When we were both finished reading the consent form, I asked the participant whether or not he understood the form’s content, and whether or not he still wished to participate in the interview as the form reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. As a further measure taken to protect the interviewees’ confidentiality, I had participants check a box rather than sign their names so that if the consent forms ever became separated from the other materials, they would not bear the names and signatures of participants, but merely an unidentifiable check mark.
Although there is no ability, at least on paper, for the researcher to say the participants agreed to participate in the interview outside of the check mark, audio recordings were made of the six interviews recording the instance where I supplied consent forms to the participants, read the consent forms to them verbatim, and recorded their audible consent to participate. No one chose to discontinue participation, although one individual did not return member-check requests late in the research process (his data are represented in the aggregate findings). I was confident that all participants understood the parameters, risks, and benefits of the study before I began the interviews; the informed consent document also included my contact information in the event that the participants had additional questions about the study or any additional information they would have liked me to add to or strike from the record.

Next, I began an individual face-to-face semi-structured interview that contained several questions I believed could foster rich feedback (see Appendices A and B for the interview protocol). I chose these specific questions because I felt that they would best help me answer the research questions in order to get at the heart of the phenomenon (i.e., ex-offenders lived experiences in their higher education transitions). The questions were investigative tools to help me generate thick description (Creswell, 2013) from which to ascertain the common essence(s) behind a particular phenomenon. My interview questions helped me answer my research questions because they gave my participants an opportunity to report their thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon of being an ex-felon transitioning into, through, and out of higher education on a Christian liberal arts campus.

Since the experiences of these ex-offender students were completely unknown, I allowed them wide latitude to describe the essence of their experiences via a semi-structured interview. This approach also allowed the Colson Scholar participants to explain what it was like to be a
Colson Scholar and to discuss the experiences they had as Colson Scholars in their own words. Through this approach, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the ex-offenders as individuals with particular beliefs, unique personalities, and specific struggles related to the phenomenon of receiving the Colson Scholarship and accessing higher education through the scholarship.

Fontana and Frey (2000) noted that semi-structured interviews involve several important steps: accessing the setting, understanding the language and culture of the respondents, deciding how to present oneself as a researcher, locating an informant, gaining trust, establishing rapport, and collecting empirical materials. This semi-structured format allowed the participant to explain the experiences he had during his period as a Colson Scholar and the circumstances surrounding those experiences. Those occurrences provided a springboard for additional meaningful questions and resulted in a richly-detailed informational account (i.e., thick description) (Creswell, 2013) that researchers must convey to their audiences in order to allow them to ascertain the extent for which the transferability of the findings might occur in their own locales with their own interviewees (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Writing about the significance of this semi-structured interview format, Baxter-Magolda and King (2007) argued that

Educators can use this guide to engage students in meaningful reflections about their education and lives. . . . Academic advisors, faculty, and student affairs educators in every realm of student life can invite students to share experiences . . . that involved change, success, anxiety, or challenges. . . . The process itself affects development because respondents are actively reflecting on their experiences and reflection contributes to development. For some participants, talking about their experiences offers a first opportunity to verbalize how they see the world, how they define themselves, and how
they relate to others; for other participants, the interview is the stimulus for constructing meaning they haven’t constructed before. (pp. 504-506)

As previously-mentioned, at the start of the interview I began to audio-record the session (after having advised the participant that the recording would begin capturing our conversation). I utilized a triple audio recording software application strategy (laptop recorder, iPad, and iPhone application Dictaphone) so as not to lose the interview content if perhaps one of the systems malfunctioned or a battery died. At the end of the interview, I reminded the interviewee that I would be in contact with him again via email with the findings review (in the member-checking phase), and I saved the audio recording files to a password-protected Dropbox account that only my transcriptionist and I could access.

I hired a transcriptionist to transcribe the content of the audio interviews and I checked her work in the transcription documents against the audio files for accuracy. I thematized, coded, and categorized the codes manually as I identified themes among the six interview transcripts. With this particular study, given the small number of participants, this seemed to be a manageable process. In other words, since I had hired transcription help I was extremely sensitive to insuring that I spent additional time immersed in the data, listened to the audio files more than once, and read the transcripts repeatedly both to check the transcriptionist’s work and to saturate myself with the data.

Microsoft Excel became a helpful repository for the organization of the manual coding of the transcription-derived themes. As I explain in detail in the next section, I repeatedly checked that my codes were borne out of the interview transcriptions throughout the process. After all, Creswell (2013) characterized qualitative inquiry’s analysis and data collection phases as
simultaneously or overlapping processes; he noted that data collection, coding, and analysis have long been well-recognized as reiterative processes (Creswell, 2013).

**Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The goal in this stage was to get at the “universal or essential quality of a theme . . . to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107, emphasis in original). According to van Manen (1990), themes are simplified forms used to explain a portion of the phenomenon under study; themes represent the product of a sense-making discovery process. Themes give location, form, space, and presence to the phenomenon, but even while giving the experience a written rebirth, themes inevitably also result in the reduction of an essence since “no thematic formulation can completely unlock the deep meaning, the full mystery, the enigmatic aspects of the experiential meaning of a notion” (van Manen, 1990, p. 88). So although they may not be exhaustible, these themes represent the “experiential structures” that embody the essence of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990).

The open-ended conversational interviews I conducted not only enhanced my understanding of the essence of the phenomenon, but also allowed for misconceptions to be clarified as they occurred, provided space for the acceptance and support of disclosures, and emphasized the participant’s interaction as the valuable contribution that it was (Moustakas, 1994). I received the audio recordings transcriptions back from the transcriptionist, and began checking them against the audio recordings; however, before I could begin to survey them for themes, I had to practice epoché and bracketing as the data analysis and synthesis process began and continued.
**Époché.** According to Jones et al. (2014), époché and bracketing are distinct yet interrelated aspects within the phenomenological analysis, despite earlier literature treating them as interchangeable concepts. Jones et al. (2014) argued that in reality, époché is the first step in the analysis process for phenomenological research (and continues to occur throughout the research process) and that bracketing logically follows. Jones et al. (2014) explained époché as the reflection and identification of one’s preconceived notions pertaining to the research inquiry and described bracketing as the willful attempt to withhold judgment or appraisal of the phenomenon by setting aside, or suspending those presumptions from affecting the research process.

These definitions may represent pristine ideals, however, as there is disagreement as to how practically able researchers are to bracket out their pre-understandings (Jones et al., 2014). In fact, recent researchers have more often suggested that scholars ought to expose their preconceptions with as full of a disclosure as possible so that those who follow and interact with the research understand where the interests of the researcher may have specifically interacted with a particular phenomenon under study (Jones et al., 2014). Despite overlapping terms and researchers’ abilities to fully identify and divulge their pre-formed mental proclivities, however, nearly all phenomenological researchers confess that as core elements of the methodological process, époché and bracketing are critical considerations related to what it means to be carefully, authentically, and intentionally engaged in research where life touches, and attempts to interpret, life (Jones et al., 2014).

Following Jones et al.’s (2014) suggestions, I practiced époché throughout the research and made efforts to bracket my presuppositions regarding this population and their experiences. I asked myself what assumptions I was making about the matters under investigation and what
ideas I might have been projecting into the research space. Some of the assumptions I had included that the participants would have had little or no college experience and probably be high school dropouts who got their GEDs in prison. I also assumed they would have been unable to attend college without this scholarship resource. I assumed that the parental education of these participants would be low and that they perhaps would have come from impoverished neighborhoods with elevated rates of crime. Most of these assumptions were based on my extensive history dealing with criminal offenders, and some were grounded in the literature I have been exposed to throughout my interdisciplinary criminal justice and higher education cognate area. Once I bracketed my presuppositions, including those related to what I knew of Schlossberg’s (1984) Transition Theory, and committed to reiterative epoché throughout the study, I was ready to begin the next major phenomenological research step, that is, phenomenological reduction.

**Phenomenological reduction.** To some researcher-practioners, Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenological reduction seemed to be a stage in the process when “presuppositions and common sense are suspended to recover original awareness . . . knowledge, common sense, beliefs, and habits” (Racher & Robinson, 2003a, p. 474). As such, phenomenological reduction represents the stage in which the phenomenon under investigation is scrutinized. In this phase, the “qualities of the experience become the focus; the filling in or completion of the nature and meaning of the experience becomes the challenge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Moustakas (1994) described the researcher’s role in this stage as looking and describing, looking again and describing, and looking again and describing, eloquently capturing the iterative nature of the phenomenological reduction phase.
I began to analyze the rich, substantial information that the participants’ interviews provided in order to determine the themes (van Manen, 1990). Themes were derived from the statements that participants made while the interviews progressed, and would eventually be codified and categorized toward an understanding of the phenomenon. I performed the thematic analysis by utilizing the detailed approach (also known as the line-by-line approach) (van Manen, 1990). This approach to thematic analysis involved carefully reading for sentences or sentence clusters within the transcripts and then questioning what each statement or cluster of statements revealed about the experienced phenomenon.

In this process, I began to study the phenomenon repeatedly from multiple angles in attempts to reduce the experience to its essential themes (Moustakas, 1994). I removed repetitive statements or irrelevant diversions from the initial probes to leave only the critical elements of the phenomenon intact. As these processes occurred, themes began to grow out of the greater perspicuity, with each theme equally valued through the horizontalizing stage of the phenomenological reductionism process—horizontalizing is the process whereby each statement made by the participant that is relevant to the phenomenon is ascribed equal validity (Moustakas, 1994).

Each sentence or cluster of sentences was then paired with an explanation of its significance to the overall phenomenon. After I analyzed the complete transcription using this approach, to the extent deemed necessary, I then used a selective (or highlighting) approach to recognize phrases that distinguished themselves as revealing inherent significance within the individual’s attempt to describe the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). The result of this latter approach, then, was that I identified several unique statements regarding the essence of the experience that were thematically representative of the phenomenon. The approach represented
the first in a series of steps designed to “systematically develop a certain narrative that explicates themes while remaining true to the universal quality or essence of a certain type of experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 97). The horizontalized statements were then listed by the themes they represented, clustered into categories, and clustered once again into textural descriptions and then finally into a structural description of the essences of the lived experiences that embodied the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Imaginative variation.** Following the categorization of these thematic, codal, and categorical alignments, the next step was imaginative variation. The task at this stage was the seeking of “possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98). From the accomplishment of these objectives came the realization of the goal of achieving the structural description of both the experience and the factors surrounding the experience (Moustakas, 1994). It was in this stage that the essence of the phenomenon—as well as the conditions that must be present for the phenomenon to occur—revealed themselves (Moustakas, 1994).

**Textural descriptions.** The final stage of the phenomenological research process, textural description, began (Moustakas, 1994). This stage was characterized by an “interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon…[as] qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, non-repetitive constituents of the experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). The careful “integration of the fundamental textural and structural depictions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100) was the result toward which all efforts were concentrated in this stage of the process.
Anticipated Codes and Themes

The codes I anticipated were born from the literature review and generally related to educational outcomes I anticipated as well as the categories offered by Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory. As a result of the information gleaned from the literature review, I anticipated some of the potential outcomes that might be expected from the post-release post-secondary education Colson Scholars had accomplished would include (a) academic outcomes (e.g., enhanced critical thinking skills, enhanced interpersonal communication skills, going on for graduate study, etc.) (Torre & Fine, 2005), (b) recidivism outcomes (e.g., decreased likelihood of returning to prison) (Johnson, 2011), (c) pro-social outcomes (e.g., giving back to the community, ministering in a local church, serving at a food pantry, etc.) (Torre & Fine, 2005), or (d) employment outcomes (e.g., obtaining and/or maintaining post-graduation employment) (Owens, 2009).

As previously mentioned the interview data, detailing the participants’ explanations of their experiences, were analyzed for certain codes and themes (a priori codes) within the transcripts particularly as they related to Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory which provided a framework for the study (i.e., deductive codes). Some codes, however, emerged from the transcription as codes that were not identified with the theory (i.e., inductive codes).

Using Saldana (2009) as a reference, the coding process was based on codes related to the sub-categories and categories of each of the four Ss of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory. In this scenario, the four Ss were the categories, and the codes were groups of themes tied to the actual wording of the participants. As the particulars within the codes of the participants became more generalized into the subcategories, and eventually the categories, concepts emerged which either supported the theory, challenged the theory, and/or expanded the boundaries of the theory
to incorporate this new sub-population of “transition-ers” (i.e., ex-felon students having moved into, through, and out of higher education programs) (Anderson et al., 2012).

Once these themes were gathered and identified, the participant and I communicated via email in a “member-checking” discussion to seek clarification as to whether or not I had adequately captured the essence of the phenomenon the participant experienced in such a way that genuinely reflected that experience (van Manen, 1990). In order to enable the participants to conduct such a review, I provided each of them with a summary of the categories I developed in response to the overall research questions of the study.

Over email, five of the six participants gave me the “phenomenological nod” that they saw their own experiences in the heart of the findings as captured (Munhall, 1994). One participant failed to respond to the member-checking request after two email attempts; he was not contacted again for member-checking purposes outside of these failed attempts at communication. The Colson Scholar participants’ consistent approval of the themes is just one measure of quality through which consumers of this research can be confident of the trustworthiness of my findings.

**Measures of Quality**

The quality of my research was enhanced by additional considerations as well. I had taken a graduate-level course on the philosophy behind and the performance of qualitative research methods. I conducted a narrative research project on a Latina migrant worker’s higher education experiences and learned a great deal through that project about how to conduct a qualitative research study. Also, throughout my career as a correctional officer, I have interviewed several hundred offenders for assessment and classification. In 2014, I led a reentry research interview team in visiting 15 Ohio prisons and community-based correctional facilities, conducting interviews with prisoner populations in each instance. I was well-qualified not only to do
qualitative research, but also to do qualitative research with this particular population. I also enhanced the trustworthiness of my findings by paying rigorous attention to detail throughout each phase of the study.

Guba (1981), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Guba and Lincoln (1989) identified four parallel criteria from which qualitative inquiries, particularly constructivist studies, could be judged for goodness of quality. These are credibility (that parallels internal validity), transferability (that parallels external validity), dependability (that parallels reliability), and confirmability (that parallels objectivity) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although researchers continue to apply these criteria to constructivist inquiries, Guba and Lincoln (1994) later contended that these inchoate criteria should be set aside as the primary criteria for assessing constructivist research, preferring rather that researchers adopt their authenticity criteria including fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This raised an apparent question with great implication for this study. That is, since the initial quality assessment criteria were abandoned by early constructivist researchers for the later-introduced authenticity measures, were these initial measures then available and appropriate to apply to post-positivist research?

First, I found the application of these original criteria to post-positivist research appropriate because Guba and Lincoln (1994) explained their rationale for preferring the later-introduced authenticity criteria to their former support of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as the preferred assessment criteria for one salient reason. They noted that the former set represents an early effort to resolve the quality issue for constructivism; although these criteria have been well received, their parallelism to positivist criteria makes them suspect. . . . The issue of quality criteria in constructivism is nevertheless not
well resolved, and further critique is needed. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114, emphasis added)

In other words, even those who created, introduced, and established the widely used former model later distanced themselves from it because of its alignment with starkly positivist-leaning assumptions regarding the nature of measures of rigor.

It would appear that even the authors of the criteria would admit that these four measures of quality are up for grabs; after all, positivists are using conventional rigor, validity, reliability and objectivity as their tests of quality and social-constructivists should have abandoned these earlier methods (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) for updated tests of authenticity as the recommended criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Who then is left to apply the initial criteria? They are certainly not tainted, but rather enjoy solid historical backing, deep philosophical underpinnings, and widespread practical application (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, it is highly appropriate for those who find themselves in the space between rejecting positivism and refraining from the full embrace of social constructivism as a paradigm—the most positivist-leaning constructivists and constructivist-leaning positivists, if you will (i.e., post-positivists)—to apply these criteria in measuring the quality of studies that occupy that space.

In fact, Morrow (2005) argued that despite their historic constructivist attachments, the parallel criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) are distinctly post-positivist. She contended that applying the “parallel criteria outside of the post-positivist frame creates logical inconsistencies” since acknowledging multiple realities, as social-constructivists researchers characteristically do, means that it is impossible for them to ascertain whether or not they actually interviewed the “true ‘knowers’” of an aspect under investigation (Morrow, 2005, p.
Following Morrow’s (2005) reasoning then, these criteria for assessing quality are best aligned with both a post-positivist paradigm and a phenomenological methodology since the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of post-positivism acknowledge participants’ flawed abilities to fully apprehend an existing reality. Therefore, I applied these four trustworthiness criteria formerly known to be heavily associated with constructivist research to this post-positivist phenomenological study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

**Credibility.** Credibility refers to the accurate reflection of the researcher’s explanation to participants’ actual experiences (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In order to enhance credibility I employed the mechanisms of peer debriefing and intercoder reliability checking, as well as member-checking. A fellow doctoral student reviewed portions of my transcripts and my coding and categorizing schematics, and contributed her assessment of both the coding system and individual codes. Five of the six participants performed member-checks assessing the findings and all agreed that they saw their experiences of the phenomenon represented within and across the findings. I also engaged in researcher reflexivity, keeping a very informal running journal of my assumptions and emerging thoughts, especially as they pertained to the theoretical framework. Although I was not able to have prolonged engagement, I did have prolonged interviews (2.5-4 hours per participant).

**Transferability.** Transferability refers to the applicability of a study’s findings in other contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I enhanced the transferability of this study by providing readers with thick descriptions of the research setting and context, including both religious liberal arts colleges generally, and Wheaton College more specifically. I also described the Colson Scholarship thoroughly. The purpose of providing readers with such extensive detail is so that
they might apprehend the context of this research in order to conclude whether or not a comparison to their own settings is appropriate (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

**Dependability.** The third aspect of trustworthiness, dependability, refers to research findings that are consistent and repeatable (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I increased the dependability of this research by documenting the decisions I made in a field log/researcher journal throughout the process (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Not only did I pursue opportunities to provide thick description while acknowledging my own biases as a researcher, I also used strong quotes and deductive and inductive coding to connect the dots so that readers could accept the findings with confidence (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Saldana, 2009). Interactions with my dissertation advisor acted as external audits throughout the process, enhancing dependability (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

**Confirmability.** Confirmability, the final test of trustworthiness, refers to the extent to which the participants, and not the researcher’s own biased interests, shape the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I attempted to improve confirmability by performing audits that insured that the data and findings originated from the research interviews (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I regularly documented my own biases and experiences in my journal as well as noted the logic behind the conclusions I reached, particularly as they related to Schlossberg’s transition theory (1984). This level of detail was necessary to probe the meaning participants made of their life events, increase immersion in the relevant data to the extent possible, and provide a high level of attention to subjectivity and reflexivity (Morrow, 2005). Finally, again, I checked the findings with the participants in order to discern whether I adequately interpreted and represented what the participants offered as events and experiences significant to their higher education transitions (Morrow, 2005).
Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, I sought to maintain a healthy vigilance as to how this research affected my participants. As a result of disclosing their present circumstances and past experiences, ex-offenders may have experienced any range of emotions from discomfort and anxiety to increased self-acceptance and self-awareness in the course of the interview process. I took great care to explain to the participants the methodological design of the study, the purposes of the study, and any perceived risks or benefits that were inherent in the research. I established clear informed consent agreements with the participants, insured their confidentiality (by employing pseudonyms I allowed them to choose), and reminded them that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological research presented me with an opportunity for “deep learning . . . heightened perceptiveness, [and] increased thoughtfulness and tact” (van Manen, 1990, p. 163) surrounding the phenomenon under study and I trust it did the same for my participants.

Summary

The goal of this study was to ascertain the experiences of ex-felon scholarship recipients on Christian liberal arts college campuses, and the qualitative phenomenological study I conducted offers answers to the related research questions. In this chapter, I strived to lay an especially important foundation of trustworthiness so that my readers could receive the findings, and subsequent conclusions and recommendations I make, with confidence. In Chapter IV, I communicate the findings and connect those findings to the review of the literature. In the final chapter, Chapter V, I discuss the results, highlight all of the important points that I gleaned from the study, and communicate reflective contributions, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research based on my findings.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

As previously noted, Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory provided the framework for this study of Colson Scholars, a group of ex-felons who have moved into, through, and out of higher education at Wheaton College. The most fundamental aspects of the theory, situation, self, support, and strategies, offered distinct ways to think about the circumstances, strengths and weaknesses, coping mechanisms, disclosures and non-disclosures, support systems, and educational outcomes of these Colson Scholar participants. Understanding the particulars of this higher education transition not only may inform continuing and improved care for current and future Colson Scholars at Wheaton (as well as other ex-offenders in higher education), but it also has relevance for future research and practice as described in Chapter V.

In this chapter, I relate the findings of the study. In order to structure the findings in the most meaningful way possible, I arranged the flow of the given information by the order of the original research questions as presented in Chapters I and III. I also integrated the four Ss of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory in areas where that framework seemed to have particular relevance. These overall areas of inquiry related to participants’ (1) assets and liabilities, (2) coping mechanisms, (3) factors influencing the disclosure of their criminal pasts, (4) experiences when they chose to disclose their criminal pasts, (5) educational outcomes, (6) identification of Wheaton supports, and (7) ways in which they felt Wheaton could have been more supportive as they moved into, through, and out of their higher education transitions.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Factor</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Jonah</th>
<th>Kenneth</th>
<th>Nate</th>
<th>Shaun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Highest Level of Education Completed</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s highest Level of Education Completed</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation Student</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First among Immediate Family or Siblings to Attend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only among Immediate Family or Siblings to Complete</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decade of Program</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Kenneth’s grandfather attended and completed college.

Several of the demographic details pertaining to the participants in this study might reveal their identities to those who are familiar with Wheaton College or the Colson Scholarship. For this reason, I report several of the details here in aggregate form only. Details that are less personally identifiable will be covered in short individual participant profiles that follow the aggregate section. Also out of respect for participants’ confidentiality, there are a few places throughout this chapter and the next where I will refrain even from the use of pseudonyms because the information provided contains acutely identifiable elements.

Aggregate Participant Data

Of the six interviewees, three identified as Black, two White, and one Latino. One graduated directly from high school, while the other five earned general education development tests (GEDs) while incarcerated (see Table 1). The six participants’ attendance at Wheaton spans the four full or partial decades the scholarship has been in existence. All entered Wheaton as full-time students; the average age was 34 with the youngest entering at age 30 and the oldest, 41. All participants entered Wheaton with transfer credits; as a result, the average stay at Wheaton was only three years. The Colson Scholar participants’ majors spanned the areas of Biblical and
Theological Studies, Communication, Sociology, Christian Education, Clinical Psychology, and Evangelism, with one individual completing two bachelor’s degrees and one individual tackling two of these areas in an interdisciplinary program. Four of the six mentioned having studied abroad while at Wheaton through its program “Wheaton in the Holy Lands.”

After completing their bachelor’s degrees at Wheaton College, all participant-Scholars either attempted or completed additional coursework. One took courses towards a certificate in progress; one is enrolled in a non-Wheaton master’s; one began a non-Wheaton master’s degree but left that program early due to shifting goals; one began a Wheaton master’s degree but did not complete it; and finally two completed master’s degrees at Wheaton, also funded by the Colson Scholarship program. The scholarship funding model has changed very little over its nearly thirty-year history, and as a result, although one interviewee entered with all incidentals covered while the others reported having to pay for their own books and/or food, all enjoyed the benefit of full tuition coverage and housing. Of those who paid for incidentals, one said the funding was not really an issue, one reported it as a significant source of stress, one received money from home to cover those needs, and two took out loans.

All participants reported living on campus while at Wheaton, although housing type varied between residence halls, campus apartments, and married student housing. All but one participant moved multiple times during their stays at Wheaton. Two participants entered Wheaton with their families, three were unmarried while attending Wheaton, and one was married and subsequently divorced all while at Wheaton. Currently, five of the interviewees are still in their first marriages, while the one who was divorced at Wheaton has since remarried. These six Scholar participants are either fathers or stepfathers to 17 children in total; three of these are young children, six are teenagers, and eight are adult children.
All participants reported working during their time at Wheaton in a mixture of volunteer and paid roles. On average, they worked approximately 24 hours per week in various roles both on and off campus. Currently, none of the participants receives any form of governmental assistance, and all are employed: two in prison ministry, two as owner-operators of businesses or practices (one blue collar, one white collar), one works in higher education, and one is an independent contractor who contracts as a local delivery driver. Only one participant recidivated after his Wheaton experiences.

**Upbringings Marked by Dysfunction and Abuse**

Although not every participant experienced abuse in his home, four of the six shared a significant story of verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or a combination of them. Often these tales of abuse, exacerbated by caregivers’ substance abuse, combined with explanations of the low value of education in their homes in general. The participants explained how these contexts played a role in the often-poor decisions they made as they became adults attempting to adjust to life challenges while struggling to make sense of their dysfunctional upbringings and their own victimization.

Participants described how these backgrounds affected their perceptions of education and shifted their educational pursuits. For example, when specifically asked why he believed that neither he nor any of seven siblings earned their high school diplomas, Alpha responded that

It was the family life that we grew up in. Education wasn’t something that was overly important in our family. I grew up in a pretty dysfunctional family. My parents divorced when I was 10. . . . [Mom was] a single mother with seven children at that time. . . . My father, he had an alcohol problem. . . . My stepdad was [a] heavy drinker. . . . And that’s the kind of environment that we grew up in. . . . Just an example, my father after my
mother had left him, when he found out where he thought we lived, he had driven by and shot out the windows of the house next door. So, that level of dysfunction. . . . You know, kids going to the bars on the weekends with them. In that type of environment, education wasn’t something that was encouraged—promoted—because it wasn’t something that had been part of our family history, if you will, unfortunately. And so that contributed, I would say, disproportionately to the lack of higher education.

Apparently, this lifestyle left the children to fend for themselves and bounce from school system to school system, boarding with whatever relative or friend would take them in.

Another participant experienced a similar level of familial dysfunction exacerbated by bouts of physical abuse:

I was taking Ritalin when I was 5 years old. . . . My whole family . . . [told me] I was a retard. So, I grew up and that’s what I thought of myself. . . . I ran away. . . . I had no reason to come home. . . . My stepdad just wanted to beat me all the time. . . . Your whole life you’re told that you’re never going to be anything. . . . My dad just, I think he just feared for me, more than anything, that somehow that my problems I was having as a child, would really affect me as an adult, as they did. But he was hoping that somehow that just through discipline he could help me. . . . I just think that for him the discipline became fear and just got out of hand a lot of times.

This participant then described how such a desire for love and acceptance absent from his childhood led him into the drug culture, during which school was an afterthought if even a thought at all.

Emotional neglect is evident in yet another participant’s account of his upbringing and the effect that abandonment and a general lack of parental guidance had on his young life. He
described a father who left shortly after he was born and a mother who gave him away to a grandmother when he was young. After several more experiences of desertion by the adults in his life, he concluded that it was his mother’s initial abandonment that left him searching for purpose:

I had the question, “Why did I even exist?” Like when I was 12, I looked into the sky. I was on a furlough where I was in a foster home, and I was back home for a visit with my mom, and I knew she didn’t want me. So I was walking around in an empty field, 12 years old, and the thought occurred to me, “God . . . why did you create me to live here, suffer, die, and go to hell?” And that was my basic worldview. It was an ultimate question. . . . I didn’t feel worthy of existence. . . . My mother had never said she loved me—well, she told me once when I was 13, when somebody told her to tell me. And she hadn’t said it [again] until I was 32 from that point, so from 13 to 32, no love.

This participant later elaborated on how he felt that his Wheaton College experiences and the education he gained there gave him the sense of purpose for which he had been longing.

A failure to connect with others relationally due to the emotionally dysfunctional upbringings participants experienced often resulted in—according to their own admissions—substance abuse and other destructive behaviors. Following that course, criminal arrest of the Colson Scholars interviewed was perhaps inevitable. This is not to say that all Colson Scholars are drug offenders, but at least four of the six interviewed were. One participant specifically referenced episodes of sexual abuse in his background as a young child and felt that the abuses of his childhood resulted in PTSD, which led him to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol, which eventually led to his incarceration. The trajectory of the majority of the Colson Scholar participants, then, seemed to include dysfunctional upbringings in abusive environments and
subsequent abuses of controlled substances, culminating in their incarcerations and subsequent releases (and at least partially qualifying them for the Colson Scholarship).

**Participants’ Educational Profiles**

In order to adequately understand the context surrounding participants’ higher education experiences, it is important to have a greater degree of insight into their upbringing, early attitudes toward education, and how they learned about the Colson Scholarship program.

**Alpha.** Like the rest of his siblings, Alpha recalled leaving home at approximately 13-14 years of age and living on the streets, with friends, or with extended family. Constantly moving meant shifting from school to school until he eventually dropped out and later earned his GED while incarcerated. Alpha recalled encountering people who had completed higher education programs and appreciating their values and the quality of life they enjoyed. He believes that had he been born in a different family environment, he probably would have become a doctor or lawyer, because he had the ability to pursue advanced academics. Although he consistently took personal responsibility for his own decisions, he also recognized the role of social influences in his life and acknowledged “always regretting not having had a college education.” Alpha learned of the Colson Scholarship from a rescue mission psychologist who encouraged him to pursue the opportunity. Eventually he married and his wife encouraged him to do the same. Although Alpha recalled waiting several years to apply, he said there was no conscious effort to delay the application; he felt the timing was “just right” when he did apply and eventually attend Wheaton.

**John.** John explained that although his parents went to college, his dad was not in the home, and his mother gave him away when he was very young. He elaborated that, in his home, “school wasn’t really encouraged.” John learned about the Colson Scholarship when he met a Wheaton graduate who knew about the program. At the time, John had been attending a
community college and had been praying about where to transfer. He recalled that, “once the door opened, I knew that was the door to take.” Even so, John reported hesitating to apply for about a year because he did not think he would be accepted, and because he was having trouble locating information on the program and knew little about the school. John called his wife’s role “instrumental” in his decision to apply.

**Jonah.** Jonah reported a strong curiosity and desire to learn throughout middle school and high school, and called himself a “life-long learner.” When Jonah heard about the Colson Scholarship four years after his release from prison, it was from a new prison ministry contact he made who had once sat on the Colson Scholarship Admissions Committee. Jonah reported waiting about six months to apply after learning about the scholarship, particularly because he had a job, had just received a promotion with the expectation of another just around the corner, and did not like change or being outside his comfort zone. Describing his view of the scholarship as almost an interruption at that time, he spoke to his stepfather about the opportunity. His stepfather encouraged him to pursue it and called him every day to ask him whether he had applied yet. Jonah called his own initial response “ignorant and stubborn” and cited his stepfather’s influence, the counsel of others, and a lot of prayer as the decision-making influences persuading him to “give the scholarship a shot.”

**Kenneth.** Kenneth reported having opportunities to go to college following high school; however, he initially did not pursue them because he thought his time for school was over. Even when he did wind up in college on an athletic scholarship, he reported having been too busy “majoring in [sports] and minoring in women” to complete his undergraduate degree. Kenneth learned of the Colson Scholarship through his prison chaplain who called Wheaton and “went to
bat” for him. Upon learning of the opportunity, Kenneth did not hesitate and was actually still on active parole when the Colson Scholarship program accepted him.

Nate. Nate described himself as having fallen away from schooling in his youth due to a struggle with drug addiction and other problems. After dropping out of school at the age of 13, he noted that he had “really stopped the educational process in [his] life.” That remained the case until approximately 15 years later when he earned a prison GED—taking the test only because he did the study course, and taking the study course only because there was coffee and doughnuts at the meeting. Years later, he spoke of hearing about the Colson Scholarship over the radio and said it was “like a thunderbolt in the room.” Nate stated that he knew that it was God calling him to walk through the open door of the Colson Scholarship as the next step for his life; but he still hesitated a bit, praying about it and confiding in his brother who encouraged him to apply. Nate said he hesitated because he questioned whether he had imagined hearing about the scholarship possibility, questioned his motivations for pursuing it, and questioned his worthiness of such a gift due to self-condemnation over his past crimes.

Shaun. Shaun admitted that he had not really taken school seriously while growing up. He recounted that in his sophomore year of high school, he got into a fight in the cafeteria. Once he was in the principal’s office, Shaun reported that the principal yelled, “Get out of my school! Go stand out on the corner with the rest of your people, because you’ll never make anything of yourself!” Shaun said he still sees that principal’s look and hears the hatred in his words even today. He said that he went into a tailspin after that event. Eventually, Shaun graduated with a GED from a boys’ school as a juvenile offender, although he recalled, “I’ve always been a reader, and I enjoyed studying.” While working as a chaplain’s clerk in prison, Shaun met the area director of Prison Fellowship and expressed to him his fear of returning to a life of drugs, despite
his deep desire to go into full-time ministry upon release. The director told him about the Colson Scholarship program and he applied, although he recalls not being very optimistic about receiving an acceptance: “I knew that Wheaton took, like, the cream of the crop, and I certainly wasn’t cream in anybody’s crop.”

**Personal Assets and Liabilities Affecting Participants’ Postsecondary Experiences**

The discussion of the findings begins with *self* (Schlossberg, 1984). I focus on the personal and demographic characteristics of these participants and their assets and liabilities as they embarked on their higher education journeys. It is worthwhile to appraise the assets and liabilities influencing participants’ outlooks as they embarked on their higher education journeys in light of their individual and collective explanations of those experiences, in order to understand the essence of the Colson Scholarship experience for these participants.

**Assets.** In their conversations about their higher education transition experiences, interviewees had an opportunity to share information about themselves, including personal and demographic characteristics (see Table 2), psychological resources, and coping responses (a future section will address coping responses). Repeatedly, five specific categories of personal assets, or sources of strength entering the transition, were noted as having aided new Colson Scholar participants to familiarize themselves with the new norms and expectations of Wheaton College: faith, family and community, age, preparation for college-level coursework and dedication.
Table 2

*Personal Assets and Liabilities Affecting Post-Secondary Experiences (RQ1)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assets</td>
<td>Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family and Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preparation for College-Level Coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liabilities</td>
<td>Underdeveloped Educational Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insecurities Exacerbated by the College Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship Difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial Instability or Indebtedness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Faith.** All but one participant described in great detail the dynamic role their active faith played in bringing them to Wheaton, sustaining them throughout their stay, and preparing them for life after graduation. For example, Nate described his faith as his very impetus to apply:

> I would have never done it except because of my faith, and I would have never gotten through it except because of my faith. I mean, it’s my faith in God that there is something far greater than us at work in life, and God has a plan and a purpose. And the beauty of our salvation in the Gospel is that God is inviting us to join Him in the work... It's from that perspective that I went to school.

Likewise, John reported that faith played the primary role in his family’s relocation to Wheaton. Specifically, he described the move as embarking on a journey of faith:

> I’ve always had an interest in theology and always wanted to grow in my understanding apart from what I was getting in the church because I thought, in some respects, it was taking too long to develop a thorough knowledge of what I believe as a Christian and why and how to articulate it... So going to Wheaton was kind of a Mecca... for me in terms of my spiritual development and education.
Jonah concurred that his faith foundation, and the ability to grow that faith, gave him strength and was central to his decision to come to Wheaton:

This being a Christian institution led me to believe that I would be able to, in some way, wrestle with my faith even more. . . . It’s good to hear different perspectives and even to enlarge what it is that you have as a foundation, and I felt that Wheaton College . . . would be an awesome opportunity to continue to just learn more about God. So, my faith played a big part in me even coming here.

**Family and community support.** Although the Colson Scholars interviewed spoke primarily of faith, systems of both community and familial support also provided them with additional assets critical to the transition. The single participants typically mentioned their communities, and the married participants more often mentioned their families; only one participant did not mention having either significant community or family support entering Wheaton. As will be discussed later, familial relationships can also be a liability; here it is an asset.

Colson Scholar participants who arrived at Wheaton with their families reported that the family support was encouraging. Participants generally saw marriage as an internal support singles would not have had. For example, John recounted that his wife was always encouraging him and inspiring him to keep going:

My wife was always there as an encourager. . . . She would give me that inspiration I needed to keep going. So I would say a Colson Scholar that has a spouse and a healthy marital relationship can be a tremendous asset. I don’t know that I would have done as well by myself.
Alpha agreed that his marriage was a support to him, and said, “Fortunately I was married…so that provided a support that a single person wouldn't necessarily have…internal support within the family home.”

Jonah, who was unmarried when he attended Wheaton, also noted that his family back home was a significant asset for him coming into the program:

My mom . . . would pretty much call me every day: “You can do it baby! You hold in there. I'm praying for you. . . .” She's pretty much like my hero. So I think knowing that I could graduate and do something good that she could be proud of was a good motivating factor.

Nate described a particularly moving scene of support from his local community, when he recounted the day they threw him a surprise going-away-to-Wheaton party. He described a mock trial setting they had arranged for him, and remembered the court drama role-played where they publicly exonerated him of his past based on his freedom in Christ. The symbolism was overwhelming and Nate recounted, “I was weeping with so much joy. . . . For somebody who had done all the things that I had done, and to know the quality of the love of these kinds of people . . . they had no reason.”

**Age.** Many odds are stacked against ex-felons attempting higher education. As non-traditional students whose past conduct and subsequent incarceration delayed their entry into higher education, Colson Scholar participants were certainly aware that age was not simply a static variable (e.g., they mention age again later as a liability). However, they also considered age an asset. For example, Alpha noted that his age gave him confidence in not having to deal with young-adult insecurities because he was “too old to feel inadequate.”
Alpha also noted that his age in relation to his student-peers was beneficial in that it provided ministry opportunities to speak into other students’ lives from the wisdom he had gained in life:

The students, they more looked at us like parents because of . . . age, gray white hair, pretty mellow personality type, good family [folks]. . . . They naturally were attracted to the family life. I didn't feel out of place at all. I had a lot of ministry opportunities with the kids as they were out there. . . . So that was fun in terms of kind of helping many of them to navigate through that [their own faith development].

Kenneth agreed, stating that “becoming an older student, that's a big gap right there, but I think it's good for both. It's good for us and it's good for the kids.”

As is evident from Alpha and Kenneth’s comments, Scholars sometimes functioned as unofficial resident counselors on campus, particularly as it related to positively influencing the faith development of the younger members of the student body. One particularly humorous example of the good-natured ribbing that came along with the age (and family) dynamic was the fact that one participant was on a study abroad trip and was constantly looking to establish an internet connection to reach his wife and son. At the end of the trip, he received the “Internet Café Finder” award.

**Preparation for college-level coursework.** Perhaps most importantly in a study about ex-felons attempting higher education were discussions of academic preparedness. Although there was certainly more uneasiness than confidence in relation to academic preparedness in certain areas (as will be clear in the liabilities section to come), aspects of general readiness for college-level learning were mentioned.
First, all six of the participants interviewed had some form of credited college-level coursework upon entering Wheaton College (i.e., all had transfer credits). The participants’ prior collegiate experiences helped, at least in some measure, to increase their confidence level entering the transition:

So going to a community college [first] kind of made it easier for me to get into the educational process and begin to learn how to learn. . . . If I wouldn’t have had those transfer credits, I would never have gotten into Wheaton . . . because you have to have proven ability. [Nate]

Jonah described the ways in which he believed his time at the community college prepared him for Wheaton:

I had never really used a computer before I went to community college and so I had to learn a lot. . . . The preparation at the community college [also] really helped me to dissect some information—to really learn how to read material. . . . It taught me how to really find the nugget, you know, the important part, the author’s theme, his argument, and to try to regurgitate that in some way. And so I think I was pretty prepared.

Dedication. Colson Scholar participants expressed their dedication to pursuing their college degrees, even when the “going got tough”:

I would say I was well prepared in the sense of I had been tried and tested. I had been out of school for 10 years and when I went back, I was dedicated. I would study from, probably 2am-4am or 2am-6am, go to work, get off at 5:30pm, go home, maybe get a snack, or maybe not even to go home and go to class at night. . . . I knew that if I put in hard work then it would pay off. [John]
A strong personal sense of dedication to accomplish their educational goals, combined with faith, family and community support, age, and preparation for college-level coursework to provide participants with assets that would offset significant liabilities.

**Liabilities.** Liabilities are personal demographic characteristics or the negative effects of personal experiences that lend to an individual’s diminished likelihood to navigate successfully into, through, and out of a transition with a healthy sense of self and well-being (Schlossberg, 1984). Although the transition into the Colson Scholarship was an anticipated one (months had been invested into preparation of materials for submission, awaiting a response, etc.), that does not necessarily mean it was a transition for which would-be Colson Scholars were prepared, or considered themselves to be prepared, especially because of their unique backgrounds as ex-offenders.

The liabilities the participants mentioned affecting their higher education experiences included underdeveloped educational skills, insecurities exacerbated by the college environment, age, relationship difficulties, family, and financial instability or indebtedness. Colson Scholar participants elaborated generally on the educational deficiencies of offenders before delving into the specific ways they felt their academic skills lacked development.

John recognized his “substandard education in the penal system growing up in the juvenile hall,” and explained that this poor preparation left him feeling unready for Wheaton’s high level of academic rigor. Kenneth likewise spoke of the gap between a prison GED and a Wheaton college education:

I felt from the very beginning that I never qualified to come to Wheaton, never, because . . . in prison you don’t get prepared to come to Wheaton College. . . . Just getting a GED doesn’t qualify you, really, to come to college.
Like Kenneth, Shaun noted the poor foundation a prison GED typically provided:

[I was] not well prepared at all . . . academically . . . especially for a college like Wheaton. . . . I did graduate from eighth grade, but . . . didn't even graduate from high school. . . . I got a GED while incarcerated. . . . [So] the first year and a half . . . I felt inadequate. . . . I was struggling educationally.

In the section to come, Colson Scholars expounded on the particular educational deficiencies they noted entering and moving through Wheaton.

**Underdeveloped educational skills.** As is evident in the preceding paragraphs regarding educational preparation as both an asset and a liability, Colson Scholar participants gave mixed responses regarding the extent to which they felt prepared for college-level coursework. All participants generally agreed that they either had underestimated the academic rigor of Wheaton or had overestimated their abilities to adapt to the educational stresses that would accompany entering a Wheaton undergraduate program. None of the Colson Scholars who participated in this study felt at ease academically, and several remarked that they felt as though they were drowning in a sea of academic demands.

Nate described the difficulty of the situation this way:

I thought that I could just jump right into this, no problem. My first class was Systematic Theology and the professor started talking in this language that I couldn’t, I didn’t recognize one word of anything he was saying. I went back to my dorm room and I was close to packing my bags because I’m like, “I can’t do this. This is crazy. What did I do?” . . . After that first semester, it was a lot easier. Getting through that first semester was what was really rough. . . . I think that’s probably been the reason why some people
have not made it, because it’s just so rigorously demanding. And if you’re not ready for it, it can be really be overwhelming, and it really was.

Expounding upon this overall lack of preparation, Colson Scholar participants were most vocal about their felt deficiencies in four distinct areas. They identified the educational liabilities of lack of academic study skills, lack of academic reading skills, lack of academic note-taking skills, and lack of academic writing skills.

*Lack of academic study skills.* A lack of study skills seemed to be pervasive in several comments, and the one from Nate below reflects the utter frustration of not knowing how to begin to study. To him, other students seemed well accustomed to knowing what it was the professors would be expecting, while he was on his own:

We don’t come there with a great knowledge of study skills . . . how to study, when to study, what to study and the professor doesn't always say. . . . People are going to their room to study, so you’re going to your room and you open this book, and you . . . don’t know!

*Lack of academic reading skills.* Closely connected to, and perhaps a subset of study skills, are good academic reading skills. Arriving at Wheaton, Colson Scholar participants seemed to believe that academic reading would be similar to other types of reading, but learned that was not the case when they realized the volume of the information they were responsible for comprehending.

I wondered if everybody else was having as hard a time as I was as far as the reading. It was a tremendous amount of reading and comprehension . . . hundreds of pages a week. . . . I literally tried to read every page and memorize everything in each page. . . . I didn’t have the time that it took to read and I'm a slow reader. [John]
As John noted, time was at a premium for Colson Scholars, and poor academic reading skills meant it took longer to get through the assigned content. Kenneth responded by enrolling in a speed-reading course but concluded, “I don’t think it was good for the comprehension that I needed to have.”

_Lack of academic note-taking skills._ The correlation between academic reading, study skills, and academic note-taking skills may be apparent; if students rely upon notes taken in class to study, particularly if professors test more from classroom content than textbook material, students are at a distinct disadvantage if they do not have adequate note-taking skills. John communicated what other participants also conveyed—the feeling of struggling with effective note-taking skills and having the perception that others were not similarly struggling.

I didn’t know about taking notes . . . [or] how to do active reading. . . . I didn’t really learn that until my senior year. So I had a lot of disadvantages where I felt inadequate because all these other students seemed to be just fine, you know? And it could be they were struggling too. But in my mind . . . I was the only one struggling.

_Lack of academic writing skills._ Finally, the Colson Scholars interviewed reported being significantly underprepared for the level of writing at Wheaton, particularly in terms of volume and quality. Some felt that solid writing skills should have already been in place when they arrived since it was not a skill that anyone on campus could teach a Scholar overnight.

I went to the writing center a couple of times, but you really just had to know how to write well. And Wheaton is known for its writing. . . . So if you didn’t learn, you just, you’re on your own, you know? And they can’t train you just by looking at your paper. [John]

Not only did participants report needing to have the ability to handle the expectations for writing quality, but also writing quantity. Kenneth recalled that “My history . . . professor had me
do 11 papers in one semester. . . . Taking full loads, 18 hours every semester with no breaks for the summer, that’s pretty stressful. But I had one goal in mind; I had to finish.” For Shaun, the academic writing struggle reminded him of his perceived Otherness, and he wrote that “I [was] struggling just to put a sentence together. . . . It was certainly noticeable that I was different. . . . I think a lot of people knew who I was.”

Some believed they had good incoming writing skills but felt that Wheaton faculty graded their work more strictly than had the faculty at the state or community colleges they previously attended. As a result, participants felt they lacked preparation for writing at Wheaton. They confessed that Wheaton faculty had higher expectations for academic writing and centered those expectations on students’ abilities to reflect higher-order thinking skills:

I had taken classes before at a couple different state colleges. You know Wheaton’s more intense from the perspective of the volume of papers and the length of the papers that they required . . . not just rote memorization . . . but actually having to articulate your position.

[Alpha]

*Insecurities exacerbated by the collegiate environment.* In addition to Colson Scholar participants’ general academic under-preparedness, the campus environment also seemed to exacerbate the effect of this combined lack of developed study, reading, and note-taking and writing skills. That is, the college environment—and these aspects would likely be relevant for ex-felons on any college campus, not just Wheaton—had some inherent stresses that created additional pressures for those with limited educational backgrounds, namely unfamiliar educational terminology, unbridled freedom, and unavoidable classroom discussion.

Classroom discussion was particularly unnerving. Nate described feeling pressure to “say something intelligent” and Jonah said that if he could change one thing about his Wheaton
experience, he regretted not answering questions in class. He explained that his reticence to contribute to classroom discussion affected his academic performance: “One on one, I talk more. Two people, a little less. Three, a little less. . . . Four, I’m pretty quiet; it’s almost like a tipping point for me. . . . I paid for that [with my grades].”

_Age_. The participants reported age as somewhat of a liability by proxy. Age, in and of itself, was not the primary issue; however, with age came factors that increased the challenges of schoolwork, intensified the tensions of life dynamics, and compounded other stresses and strains. John reported sleep deprivation and low energy; “I didn’t sleep . . . basically, I just took brief naps. . . . I thought, well, if I had gone when I was younger—because I had a lot more energy when I was younger. . . . [I could have] just gone straight through.”

One issue that is more common to older students is death in the family. Traversing such loss can create additional stresses, as one participant noted:

Because of our ages, something that we dealt with that your traditional student wouldn’t . . . we had a lot of loss of life in family members. [My wife] lost her only two sisters at young ages while we were there. And my dad passed away. . . . You’ve still got papers that are due and all the other responsibilities. . . . Most kids didn’t have to deal with that.

Participants’ age dynamics are typical of non-traditionally aged students. Indeed, the most common way in which people view traditional students as traditional is that they fit into an age range that is immediately post-high school.

Formerly incarcerated populations do have another factor tied to age that directly relates to their imprisonment and adds stressors to their higher education pursuits. Having lost time to imprisonment, they often attempt multiple goals simultaneously, shortly after release, creating
additional stress. That is, post-release ex-felons are often trying to “make up for lost time” and may enter marriages or start families, adding concurrent stress. One participant’s experience is a good example in that he reported that “We got married . . . conceived on our honeymoon, had a baby . . . and then we were on our way to Wheaton College. So it was that quick.” For the Colson Scholars interviewed, learning to be a student often coincided with learning to be a husband, a father, an employee, and even re-learning what it meant to be free.

Sometimes, the age gap also created psychological distance between participants and other students, leaving the participants feeling they had few interests in common. John described that it was kind of a lonely journey because, again, I was older than the standard students, at least 10-12 years older. So I didn’t really engage in friendships as much as I could have because . . . we didn’t have a lot in common . . . age-wise it was incompatible.

Kenneth also felt he was a “novelty for the students” due to the age difference. Jonah felt similarly, illustrating the age gap this way:

I was so much older than most of my class, people would [call me mister] . . . like I was an old man. . . . somebody had a phone out and started talking about this song, or this group, this stuff I didn’t know. So I was a little out of the loop with some of the basic conversation, so that was a little of a detractor to [engaging] the population at large.

Some participants noted how these interactions contributed to the psychological distance they felt, although not all felt that way. Participants who did feel this distance described themselves as being in different stages of life than the other students, especially in relation to jobs and relationships. Participants implied that these differences impeded their abilities to build relationships, emotionally connect with their peers, and share information about themselves (hindering further disclosure).
**Relationship difficulties.** The liabilities that exist and persist in the lives of the Colson Scholars who participated in this study are evident in their descriptions of their journeys. Family histories of dysfunction, abuse, and substance abuse clearly limited the participants’ subsequent abilities to establish and maintain meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. Reflecting on his emotional development entering Wheaton, Nate stated, “I didn’t have any framework in my emotional life or in my experiences for being a friend, or for making friends, for letting people in, because I had, all my life, I had been running from people.”

Complicating the emotional brokenness left behind from those family experiences, when these participants were incarcerated, they learned what Johnson (2012) and others have called the “prison code,” a set of manipulative behaviors that typically serve an individual well while incarcerated. This prison code takes root as inmates live in the institutional setting, and similar manipulative behaviors can be hard habits to break even after release and even upon entering a place like Wheaton.

Nate described how his invitation to Wheaton caused him to question his self-worth due to his past actions. Once at Wheaton, he began to become overly introspective, suspecting that even his good deeds had underlying manipulative motives:

How did I trick my way into here? How did I manipulate my way into Wheaton College to make this happen? . . . Felons and people that get in trouble . . . yeah we’ve made some dumb choices but we wanted to make those choices because we thought that that would benefit us more than some other choice at the time. And we’ve become master manipulators at, getting our way. . . . So, along this whole process, I'm always trying to think [whether] even subconsciously I am manipulating my way through [or] genuinely earning this . . . [and also] probably a lack of self-worth. . . . Really, I do struggle with
self-condemnation a lot because I can't believe I did some of the things that I did. And it’s
not the things you get caught and serve time for, it’s the things that you never got caught
for that you did. . . . So, I just, I just couldn’t think that there would be any place for me
like [Wheaton].

Participants also described gaps in academic preparation and available financial resources
as alienating differences that presented barriers to relationship building. Although participants
alternatively described their fellow students positively as fine young people with noble objectives,
the participants also felt that their peers were all honor students coming straight from high school
who were better able to handle distractions because the transition from high school to college was
not that difficult for them. Scholars interviewed generally perceived that other students’ life
histories revolved around their academic preparation, and that they were intentionally on career
tracks that they had already thought out and worked through with their parents.

Certain Scholars interviewed also felt that other students were culturally unaware of the
fact that the participants’ upbringings were foreign to their own, as the other students appeared to
have unfettered access to unlimited resources, were children of affluence from a “different rank,”
and could work anywhere they wanted, or choose not to work if they preferred. One participant
reported feeling out of place as a result:

You've got to work to survive. So it proved to be challenging. . . . I was grateful to be
there, but it was still that awkwardness of just being there with these kids that had daddies
and daddy’s credit card, and here I am struggling.

Not all students felt such distance; some interviewed described their peers in the Wheaton student
body as encouraging, welcome, and open, and felt that other students cared for them in ways that
might be unique to a Christian environment.
Family. For those who built and maintained relationships after prison and prior to their attending Wheaton, their successes presented an indirect liability. Earlier in this study, the participants considered marital and family relationships an asset; however here they represent a liability as well. Although both single and married Colson Scholars interviewed seem to believe that married Scholars were fortunate to have a built-in support system (the aforementioned asset), they also recognized that the family’s needs consumed nearly all available time outside of educational pursuits, which they likewise posed as a liability as it occasionally also conflicted with those pursuits.

Specifically, married participants, especially those with children, recalled feeling guilty for the time they invested studying and described themselves as constantly trying to make that time up to their family members by giving them all of their non-class/non-studying/non-work time. One single participant believed that married Scholars “missed out” on important parts of the campus community, a unique aspect of student life at Wheaton. Based on conflicting participant statements, it seems best to me at present to view any negative effect of Scholars’ limited engagement with the campus community to be offset by the positive effects of the support a healthy family unit can provide to the Scholar, although the existence of these tensions provide fodder for future research.

Financial instability or indebtedness. No Colson Scholar interviewed noted being asked about his financial profile, indebtedness, or need for financial stability upon entering Wheaton College and receiving the scholarship, although a few entered with debt. At least one reported having educational debt upon entering Wheaton and another reported that although he was debt-free at the time of his family’s move to Wheaton, paying the moving company to get them there caused them to arrive with $4000 of credit card debt.
The Colson Scholars who participated in this study shared with me a range of assets and liabilities they felt they had as they moved into Wheaton College. The liabilities, in particular, seemed to affect participants’ higher education experiences both directly and indirectly. The underdeveloped educational skills participants repeatedly acknowledged have clear implication for their higher education experiences.

However, the import of the indirect concurrent stressors participants experienced cannot be understated. Participants reported that their insecurities in the higher education environment hindered their engagement in classroom discussion, that as a result, negatively influenced their academic success. Interpersonal dialogue with other students, and thus socialization, was similarly hampered by participants’ lack of emotional connections needed to build relationships. A pair of participants even spoke of having to reverse the dysfunction, experience healing and personal emotional development, and proactively reaching out to others before they could engage in genuine authentic friendships devoid of manipulation.

Despite the significant challenges these obstacles presented in and of themselves, they were exacerbated by the enduring effects of past substance abuse and the time and energy that providing for a family required while simultaneously pursuing a college education. Age, by proxy, presented additional stressors: deaths in the family, sleep deprivation, and pressure to attempt and achieve multiple goals simultaneously are all age-related liabilities participants reported affecting their higher education experiences. Finally, incoming financial instability or indebtedness presented additional liabilities to ex-felons’ higher education pursuits because having to take the time to seek and maintain additional employment occupied time that could perhaps otherwise be invested in the pursuit of academic success.
Many of these liabilities were similarly interrelated; for example, time spent gaining and maintaining additional employment was time that Scholar participants with families on campus could not invest in familial responsibilities. Increased age also meant increased likelihood of a family death; deaths in the family seldom occurred at convenient times and also meant redirecting already-allocated time into the process of grieving, traveling to attend funerals, and settling estates. Family then, earlier introduced as a significant supportive asset, can make valid claims on an individual’s time that makes the dynamic dually function as both asset and liability. The totality of these assets and liabilities begins to shed light on how the participants saw themselves, and how these aspects that existed prior to their arrival at Wheaton could continually affect their higher education transitions if mechanisms for coping with such liabilities were not effectively employed.

Coping Strategies Participants Employed

The notion of “self” also incorporates psychological resources such as self-efficacy, spirituality, and resiliency (Schlossberg, 1984). Thus, it is beneficial to shift the focus of these findings to a section that will answer my second research question, related to the coping strategies of Colson Scholar participants as they journeyed through their higher education transitions. Typically, coping responses can take three distinct forms: (a) responses of action/inaction that modify the situation, (b) responses that control the meaning of the problem as to reframe it, and (c) responses that help the individual to manage stress and adequately care for self (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).
For the Colson Scholar participants interviewed, responses typically aligned with the modification and stress-management forms of coping. They reported coping resources that assisted them with the high level of academic demand they faced at Wheaton as well as other challenges that accompanied their educational journeys. Specifically, they mentioned academic coping through seeking out tutors and professors, growing in self-sufficiency and self-efficacy, availing themselves of spiritual resources, and persevering through the program by ultimately seeing their pursuit of higher education as being more about others than about themselves (see Table 3).

**Sought academic help.** All Colson Scholars interviewed mentioned seeking out academic help to help them adjust to Wheaton College’s high level of academic rigor. Professors and tutors seemed to be very available to give of themselves and their time to help the participants succeed.

**Professors.** The extent of support professors provided to Colson Scholar participants on a regular basis will be evident in the later section on supports. However, the role professors played in students’ strategies for coping with academic rigor is worth noting here. In light of the academic demand and participants’ relative underpreparedness to meet such demand, the participants were proactive in their efforts to reach out to their professors and instructors, communicate their needs, and implement that feedback. The academic help these participants

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**Table 3**

*Coping Strategies Participants Employed Moving through Higher Education (RQ2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coping Strategy</td>
<td>Sought Academic Help from Professors and Tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grew in Self-Sufficiency and Self-Efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilized Spiritual Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pursued Education to Serve Others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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most needed, perhaps evident from the previously mentioned liabilities regarding preparation, included study skills, test-taking strategies, and guidance in academic writing.

Kenneth explained that his attitude toward approaching his professors was intentional and that his professors regularly agreed to meet with him for extra hours or invited him to their houses for help. Nate explained the types of questions these opportunities with faculty permitted him to ask:

[how] they tested and why they tested the way they do so I could be better prepared for their exams the next time. . . . Basically I would go on tangents not knowing what to, let’s say, write a paper on. So I would seek out the professor and really get them to help me narrow down the focus so that I could concentrate better. Instead of trying to go too wide, narrow it down to something more manageable.

Tutors. Five of the six Scholars interviewed reported utilizing tutors. On occasion, professors recommended or connected them with tutors, but most often, the participants were proactive in locating tutors themselves. The participants reported finding students with high proficiency levels in particular courses, or those who had taken a course and passed it, as their self-selected tutors. Scholars interviewed typically reported having two specific tutors, most often they reported seeking help for Math/Algebra and Languages.

**Grew in self-sufficiency and self-efficacy.** The Colson Scholars interviewed coped with their limitations by growth in self-sufficiency and self-efficacy. Some of the Scholars interviewed reported growing in their self-confidence as they found a depth in their abilities to become resourceful within stressful situations that they had not realized they possessed.
Shaun described how he rose to the academic challenges in response to others’ faith in him and how that helped him find within himself the resources to succeed despite the ever-present temptation to quit:

What kept me from withdrawing is that I just didn’t want to feel again like a failure. . . . It was a pride thing. Also, it was, I did have a goal in mind or in sight. . . . There were just a number of people I didn’t want to let down, because a number of people had been, like, rooting for me. But they didn’t know how difficult it was for me.

John noted that he simply had to adjust by finding those resources in himself to persevere:

I had a hard time adjusting to the amount of rigor. . . . This is Wheaton College . . . so you just have to kind of fish or cut bait, so to speak, and you weren’t going to be babied through the program. I just had to find in me whatever resources I had to make it through.

Kenneth also reported using his resources to “make it happen.” Specifically, he tape-recorded lectures and took notes. Alpha noted the need to have a “bulldog” mentality to just toughen up to handle what he encountered. Nate also reported doing whatever he needed to do to persevere:

The bar was so high and if you didn’t reach it, they didn’t dumb it down because you were older. . . . I burned the midnight oil. . . . You can’t change it; it is what it is. You either make it or don’t. I had to sit in the front row of every class every semester so that I didn’t have any disturbances . . . peripherally, so I could focus.

As resourceful as the others, Jonah coped with the academic challenges by finding ways to teach himself content he felt he should have known:

I think inherently within me, I kind of think I can do anything. . . . So I think I just tried.

There were times I was introduced to information for the first time and I didn’t know what
it was, and everybody else did . . . [like] graphic calculators; I’d never seen one. YouTube is the greatest thing since sliced bread for me, because then I would go and watch somebody do it [and learn]. . . . So I felt challenged, but I wouldn’t say inadequate.

**Utilized spiritual resources.** Colson Scholar participants reported several spiritual resources that aided them in coping at Wheaton College. The resources of prayer, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the grace of God were repeatedly mentioned—not too surprising for a group for whom faith was already mentioned as an asset—and these spiritual resources made a difference in the participants’ encouragement as they progressed through their education at Wheaton. Through the academic challenges, employment responsibilities, and familial health issues, Alpha’s faith kept him stable. Nate contended that he found similar spiritual help in his quiet times with God:

> If I didn’t stay on my face praying all the time, and covering every day and every class with prayer, I would have never made it through there. I’d pray a lot, and so I know that it was in the quietness of those times and in my devotions that I had every day that God used them to keep me on task and to keep me inspired and encouraged.

**Pursued education to serve others.** One theme that came up across interviews was that education is not primarily for personal benefit, but rather for the benefit of others. Sometimes the Scholars interviewed delineated spiritual motivations such as pleasing God or representing Christ, and sometimes they described more of setting an example for their children as primary among their purposes.

Participants spoke of themselves as aware that they were embodying the hopes and dreams of the benefactors of the scholarship fund and consistently reminded themselves of this charge in
order to cope with the academic and non-academic stresses, especially when the temptation to withdraw was most alluring. John elaborated

Several times I felt like withdrawing, but what motivated me to stay was the scholarship is a tremendous gift and I didn't want to squander what was given to me. I thought about people coming behind me, you know? If I don't finish, if I don’t do a good job, they may shut the program down or somebody else that could have benefitted wouldn't because of my waste. . . . So I want to represent Christ and the Colson Scholarship in a way that seeks to glorify God. . . . Some people don't appreciate what they’re given, they just squander it and blow it. And as convicts, you’d expect that. You’d expect somebody to get discouraged and give up. So I had a lot riding on me.

As is clear from that statement, the Colson Scholars interviewed spoke of representing other ex-felons well and were generally cognizant of how their successes and failures would affect those who would come after them. Kenneth spoke of seeing himself as that kind of trailblazer:

I saw myself as a pioneer, an ex-convict coming to the campus of Wheaton College which is supposed to be the Harvard of Christian schools, you know? . . . You don’t get an education for yourself; you get it to serve others. . . . So quitting was never an option. . . . I worked hard. I dedicated myself to study because I knew I couldn't fail, and I had to think about the guys coming behind me. . . . As Christians we have to be equipped to serve others, so higher education was a vehicle through which I would become much better equipped.

For Kenneth, equipping himself for the service of others was the purpose for pursuing his education from the start.
The Colson Scholars interviewed saw themselves as servants of those who would come behind them and considered adaptability an expected characteristic of a pioneer in the Colson Scholarship program as well as an attribute they embraced for the greater good. For example, after sharing horror stories of roommate problems, Jonah concluded by saying that

It humbled me. . . . I had to kind of temper myself and not complain. . . . I just endured a lot so that the scholarship could live. . . . I felt like the cause was bigger than me. . . . For my family I needed to do it, for me, and for God as well, [and for] ex-offenders everywhere. . . . I also wanted to really just do good even for a kid coming out of the ghetto. . . . All those things were motivating factors for me to just do better, so I never thought about quitting.

Disclosure of Criminal Past or Ex-offender Status

Another “S” of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory is the situation surrounding the transition. Although disclosure is only one aspect of these ex-felons’ higher education transitions, it is arguably one of the most critical to bring to the surface, as it is the primary differentiation between Colson Scholars and “traditional” non-traditional students. For example, ex-felons like other non-traditional groups of students, are generally older, are likely pursuing multiple simultaneous goals, and are academically challenged for a myriad of reasons. However, even if there is significant overlap between adult learner subpopulations (e.g., parenting students, veteran students), there are also characteristics of each of these groups that uniquely separate that group’s experiences, such as disclosure represents for ex-felon students.
Table 4

Factors Influencing Disclosure and Non-Disclosure of Criminal Past (RQ3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
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| Disclosure   | Spiritual Transformation  
Group Representation  
Opportunity to Offer Hope  
Self-Redefinition        |
| Non-Disclosure| Image Maintenance  
Pre-Disclosure Emotions (e.g., embarrassment, shame, abnormality)  
Post-Disclosure Expectations/Fears  
(e.g., fear of angering someone, of rejection, of fulfilling racial stereotypes) |

The decision to disclose or not to disclose one’s criminal past is a choice Colson Scholars navigate on a daily basis and this aspect is truly inseparable from what it means to be both an ex-felon in higher education in general, and a Colson Scholar, more specifically. The factors that play a role in Colson Scholars’ decision-making processes surrounding the choice to disclose or not to disclose their pasts inextricably influence the essence of what it is like to be an ex-felon attempting higher education. Navigating these waters of disclosure, especially in light of concurrent stressors, best describes the ex-felon’s situation in his or her higher education transition.

Factors influencing disclosure. Colson Scholar participants reported several factors that influenced their decisions to disclose their criminal pasts to others. I coded these reasons, or factors, into four broad categories: spiritual transformation, group representation, opportunity to offer hope, and self-redefinition (see Table 4).

Spiritual transformation. The Colson Scholars interviewed were nearly univocal in their primary reasons for making their stories known to others, and those reasons were pervasively spiritually-motivated. Common themes included the notion that the story was not really the participant’s story but was actually God’s grand narrative in which the participant played but a small part. Overall, participants seemed to welcome invitations to speak of their pasts, even if
somewhat apprehensively in certain situations, because ultimately these were opportunities for them to speak freely about their spiritual conversions as others were naturally curious about them and their pasts. Kenneth described this dynamic:

> I know that many of the Scholars and many people that have been in prison want to keep it a secret. . . . [But] as long as we use it for the advancement of the gospel, why not disclose it? So I was very open [and] vocal about where I came from. I knew I was representing Christ. . . . I had no problem whatsoever if people knew who I used to be and they had to find out who I am now, in Christ. It’s a big difference. . . . Romans 1:16 [says], “Don’t be ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God, for anybody, for everyone who believes.” So I took that to heart and I’ve never had a problem with that.

The Scholars interviewed reported enjoying the occasions that others’ questions gave them to speak of the transformation Christ brought about in their lives and humbly acknowledged that their lives actually gave visibility to the change that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings. For example, Shaun said invitations “gave me an opportunity to talk about how Jesus had transformed my life from this scumbag who spent most of his time . . . smoking coke and drinking and partying all day and all night, to what and who I am now.”

**Group representation.** Colson Scholar participants also considered interpersonal factors such as group representation when they chose either to disclose or not to disclose their criminal pasts. For example, Kenneth noted his awareness that he was representing millions of incarcerated persons in US detention facilities (and even more regularly returning to US local communities) and disclosed his past in order to give them a platform and a voice. He said that that as Colson Scholars, he and his fellow participants were cognizant that they were “representing . . . the 2.6 million people in America and their families and even the victims, who
are in prison in America. So we have to be a voice—Proverbs 31:8-9—to be a voice for the voiceless.”

**Opportunity to offer hope.** Another interpersonal factor considered by the Scholars interviewed was whether or not there was an opportunity to offer another individual hope. That is, participants understandably never wanted to cheapen their stories by simply telling them for the sake of telling them. However, when they felt like disclosing their pasts would be of genuine help and provide a source of hope to another individual, the participants nearly always chose to disclose. Alpha spoke of instilling hope as a guiding value in disclosing his past to others: “If there was need to disclose it maybe to help someone that was struggling with something in their life that they needed hope . . . hope for change in another’s life, in that context then, I disclosed.”

Likewise, Jonah pointed out the fact that this hope is not empty or fleeting, but can make a real and positive difference in the life of another with similar issues in their family structures: “Every now and again I might share a story if someone reaches out and tells me they have an issue in their family. . . . I usually only do it in the sense where I think the story makes a difference to the person.” The Scholars interviewed spoke of their higher education experiences as hope-giving and framed opportunities to speak of their pasts as stories that have given hope to others. Since participants began to learn over time that if they could make something of themselves following imprisonment others could do the same, they began to believe their story had real potential to make a difference and that their audience would be less likely to perceive their story as arrogant and more likely to perceive it as encouraging and hope-inspiring.

**Self-redefinition.** Self-redefinition was also influential in Colson Scholar participants’ disclosure of their criminal pasts; however, because self-redefinition was also represented an education outcome I will address it more extensively in that later section. Nevertheless, the role
that the participants’ redefined selves played in disclosure is significant as they began to see themselves as not only spiritually transformed but as genuinely changed, worthwhile individuals as a result of that transformation.

For example, as Alpha asserted, freedom to disclose comes in redefining one’s self in a healthy way, as something more than the sum of one’s past mistakes. He noted, “Well I didn’t hold back because, for me, I refused to allow any particular point in time in history to define who I am today.” The implication by extension, then, is that failing to disclose one’s criminal past allows that moment or those moments in time to continue to define a past offender. This self then duels with the redefined self, giving the participant the feeling that he has a “dual identity” or is a “double agent” as John and Jonah reported feeling, respectively.

The notion of the redefined self is also prevalent in relation to “image maintenance” as a factor influencing non-disclosure in the next section. For now, it is important to note that the Colson Scholars interviewed spoke of themselves as truly changed. Although the findings here are supported by substantial evidence revealing participants’ perceptions of their redefined selves, I still caught them throughout the interviews referring to their pasts as “who I was” rather than “what I did.” In other words, the Colson Scholars interviewed still appear, at least to some extent, to continue to conceptualize their identities through the ex-felon lens in light of the crimes they committed.

**Factors influencing non-disclosure.** Participants gave an additional three distinct thematic areas or rationales as to why they chose not to disclose their pasts: image maintenance, negative emotions related to the decision to disclose, and negative expectations of the outcomes of the disclosure.
Image maintenance. In the literature review I documented the stigma of the ex-convict in society, at least in US society. It is really no wonder, then, that maintaining one’s unsullied image is both socially wise and personally advantageous in US culture, more often than not. However, such a dichotomy (i.e., revealing some of your attributes to those who know you and others to those who do not) presents its own set of unique challenges, such as the “double agent life” John referenced:

I was afraid exposing [myself as] an ex-offender would change their perspective of me. . . . They could possibly withdraw from me. . . . Some of that though was internally psychological, because throughout my life I felt rejected. . . . [So I was] less involved with the community, less concerned about reaching out and building relationships because I wanted to stay withdrawn. So, in some respects that background kept me from really getting the full experience of being on campus. . . . It’s almost a protective mechanism on both ends. I would want to protect them from not having to feel insecure, and I would also want to protect myself. . . . But in a sense you’re living this double agent life.

There seems to be great irony in John’s description of the double agent life in that as he avoided disclosure due to his fear of rejection, his withdrawal from others actually served to reject others, which in turn virtually ensured his own rejection.

In an attempt to have and maintain a good impression, Jonah explained that even when ex-felons might want to disclose facts about themselves and their pasts, they must be careful not to share this dual identity too early:

I wear a kind of a banner that says, “EX-OFFENDER.” And so you’re always kind of conscious of the fact—that’s your life. And you don’t always want to expose it; sometimes you do. And so I think for me the difficulty was dealing with like a dual
identity. I’m just an average guy, but then I have this story that somebody might find out about. . . . The banner, if you will, I think that sometimes causes some division, you know, if it’s recognized too early.

**Pre-disclosure emotions.** In addition to image maintenance, the Colson Scholars interviewed also chose not to disclose their criminal pasts due to their expectations of what disclosure might bring. Considerations that kept participants from disclosing their pasts included emotions of embarrassment and shame and feelings of abnormality.

*Feelings of embarrassment and shame.* One factor that kept Colson Scholar participants from opening up about their pasts is that they were experiencing embarrassment and shame. Participants reported that their past actions continue to affect who they are today, and that their feelings of shame are ongoing. As a result, participants reported always having to protect themselves from those negative feelings. Shaun exemplified the choice not to disclose due to this demotivating factor: “I just kept that part to myself…out of embarrassment.”

*Feelings of abnormality.* Another emotion that kept Scholars from disclosing is feeling abnormal on Wheaton’s campus. Interviewees expressed a reticence to disclose because they simply wanted to be considered “normal” students on the campus. As Jonah explained, “I was an ex-offender on campus. That probably wasn’t the norm. . . . [Only] maybe another one or two people had been in prison, so dealing with that is sometimes difficult, because it’s a part of your life.”

**Post-disclosure expectations.** In addition to image maintenance and pre-disclosure emotions, Scholar participants were concerned about how disclosure might result in awkwardness and discomfort for themselves and others. Shaun said he chose not to disclose out of “not wanting to make the other person feel uncomfortable. Maybe I was just more empathetic.”
Likewise, other Colson Scholars interviewed also chose not to disclose their criminal pasts due to their expectations of how disclosure might affect their audiences and their audiences’ dispositions toward them. Considerations that kept participants from disclosing their pasts included fear they might anger someone, fear that others might reject them, and fear that they were fulfilling others’ racial stereotypes.

*Fear of angering someone.* Another reason Colson Scholar participants did not share their pasts in certain situations is the expectation that disclosure would upset or anger someone. For example, although participants never described other students as vocalizing disagreement with the Colson Scholarship ideal or ever acting as if the funding of Colson Scholars generally seemed unfair to them, this possibility caused participants to avoid speaking about their pasts with others. Jonah suggested that withholding such information about himself was wise because of what he continues to hear about ex-offenders: “Getting a full scholarship to Wheaton College would not usually be the thing that most people would agree with . . . [based on] the rhetoric I hear. . . . People that don’t know my history . . . say a lot of negative things [about] ex-offenders.”

*Fear of rejection.* Finally, the Colson Scholars interviewed reported a fear of rejection as demotivating self-disclosure. One participant felt that encountering questions about his past was extremely unnerving because he felt that he had no good answer to give and that students would judge him as a result. He compared such a potential scene and its awkwardness to an undeclared student being asked about his or her major and not being able to give an answer acceptable in the eyes of others. John also explained that, over time, he learned to recognize his fear of rejection for what it was and ultimately to acknowledge that his fear was not necessarily justified by his past disclosure experiences:
Fear is probably the greatest factor in me not sharing . . . rejection for the most part. . . .

The interesting thing is over the course of time that hasn’t really been the case. So there are facts that fly in the face of my fear which allows me to really classify it as fear.

_Fear of fulfilling racial stereotypes._ Participants reported that race-related differences alienated them from their peers and left them feeling as if they could not, or should not, share their pasts (and that if they did so, they would not be well received). Although perceptions of racial differences varied significantly (even within participants of the same racial group), it was more common for participants underrepresented on Wheaton’s campus to experience negative cross-racial interactions. The two White participants interviewed and one of the Black participants either did not mention racial dynamics at all, or reported that issues of racism, covert or overt, were not problems at Wheaton. One of the White participants even called Wheaton a “wonderful environment of diversity” in comparison to his own home state and culture.

The other half of the participant pool, one Latino and two Blacks, mentioned feeling like a novelty to the other students, questioned their “fit” at Wheaton due to the fact that they were the only students who looked like them, questioned other students’ reception of them, considered themselves to be not “normal” on the campus, and reported feeling out-of-place. Perhaps John’s response was most salient, as he spoke to how race negatively affected his desire to disclose his past to others:

I held back because I didn’t want to poison the relationships that I had . . . in the sense that because I’m Black, I “fit the description” . . . because typically the Black family is impoverished, fractured, dysfunctional, jailed or on drugs or something. So I fit into that scenario, and I really do fit into that, and I don’t want to fit into that.
John went on to say that whenever people would get to know him first, they actually saw that he was different from those commonly-held stereotypes he presumed they had. By establishing a relationship over time before he chose to share his past with others, John felt that he was able to offer them a narrative context which they would receive that would help cushion learning the news of his criminal past and serve to give them “a healthier perspective [of the Black family].”

Similarly, Jonah recalled

I was hiding in classes and ducking and dodging because I was [an older], African-American, and you could tell I probably was from the city. Some people could figure out that I was a Colson Scholar, even though I was hiding. . . . [Other students] would have to be somewhat mature for us to have some dialogue. . . . [I was afraid that if I told them and they] didn't have a lot of exposure . . . [I would be their] subject of conversation all the time—and I don't want to be the subject all the time. . . . I think some of [the other students] would have preferred that I wasn't here. . . . [But] I did not leave the college with a bad taste.

Shaun also felt that race played a part in perpetuating distance between him and other students, keeping him from building effective relationships:

Trying to get reintegrated back into society like a normal person on a campus that you know that you’re not normal . . . it was just kind of awkward. . . . I was the only one [in the dorm] that had a tan permanently. . . . They'd see me coming and they’d stand to one side. . . . I'm not the Big Bad Wolf.

It is apparent that the Colson Scholars interviewed felt that these post-disclosure expectations, especially those pertaining to racial differences, distanced them from other students in ways that limited full disclosure of their pasts. Despite the post-disclosure expectations,
however, it was common for participants to concede that they were usually well-received when they did choose to disclose their criminal pasts.

**Participants’ Experiences Disclosing Pasts**

As Jonah noted, fear of rejection seldom resulted in a realization of that fear. In other words, in instances during which Colson Scholar participants have overcome their concerns regarding image, emotions, or expectations, and have chosen to disclose their pasts, they often encountered bewilderingly positive results.

**Positive experiences upon disclosure of Colson Scholar status.** Often participants found themselves surprised by the positive responses they received upon disclosing their criminal histories, and frequently disclosure was the start to lasting relationships. For example, Nate said,

> Being a non-traditional student, everybody wanted to know my back story. . . . I was [on a school trip and] . . . it was about maybe 24-30 students and professors. . . . They [did] once-a-week kind of devotional things together as a group. . . . One evening I agreed to share my testimony. And again, it was one of those experiences where God’s just physically present and ministering in you and through you. And at the end, the result was that you felt this, the compassion and love of all these people toward you. . . . I’m still friends with the majority of [those folks]. . . . So when I went back the following year for school, I had all these new friends, real deep friendships.

In addition to deep friendships, disclosure brought other benefits. John described how disclosure brought healing from rejection and helped him see that earlier and more complete yet cautious disclosure may have benefited him even more:

> The most vivid time is when there was an opportunity for me to give a testimony before 75 or 100 students. . . . I was afraid to do that because I didn’t want people to reject
me because of my past. . . . and lo and behold, people didn’t reject me. They actually loved me. . . . That helped me start to heal from [earlier] rejection [but] I missed out on a lot of opportunities to develop life-long relationships [with faculty], to learn from their wisdom, to gain perspective on life, and probably to get direction that I lacked. . . . I didn’t have a father, so some of my male professors would have been—that would have been good to stay in touch with them. So I would change that and not be afraid of how they thought, because reality is, I was my worst enemy.

For John, then, there was a sense in which the choice not to disclose became a regret even though the actual account was quite positive.

Finally, Jonah shared another account of acceptance in the face of his fear and reticence to disclose:

I accompanied [my mentor on] a trip to Angola Prison, and while we were there, he thought it was a good idea for me to tell all the students that had traveled with us that I was an ex-offender. So I was confronted with that option; it was kind of a request, and I really didn’t agree with the request, but I did pray about it, and I had a certain amount of respect for him, so I did. There was a lot of anxiety. There was a little bit of fear there. . . . The reaction was overwhelmingly acceptable. . . . More students gravitated closer to me, which it was a little bit surprising. . . . Some of them started to expose some of their own family issues [about family members in prison or on drugs and asked his opinions]. . . . I didn't really expect that.

John’s experience turned out to be beneficial both for him and those who heard his story.

**Negative experiences upon disclosure of Colson Scholar status.** Although negative experiences were less common than positive ones, not all disclosure experiences were as positive
as those just described. As the Colson Scholars interviewed progressed through their degree programs and developed the courage to disclose their pasts, the vulnerability that accompanied their openness sometimes bore an associated cost. Nate described one such experience, the aftermath of it, and how it affected him:

There was another time the following spring break trip . . . when I got to share my testimony all these kids just had nothing but fear . . . to the point where they no longer felt comfortable with me being a part of the group and I had to leave [and come home early]. . . . [One girl’s] parents had considered taking her out of school because I was there. . . . It made me feel like I had failed the program in some way. . . . I was distraught for a long time. . . . For the rest of that school year, those students really avoided me and they wouldn’t talk to me. And that was really hard. . . . When they were afraid of me, I wanted to defend myself, and that may have not [done] did the situation any good.

Alpha also shared a negative disclosure-related experience and Shaun and Jonah reported mixed experiences depending on situational circumstances. Although negative experiences were surprisingly rare according to the participants, they did cause significant discomfort and frustration when they occurred.

For example, John described his emotions during a situation in which a professor asked him, with a few students still filtering out of class, “What were you in for?”:

That made me feel embarrassed and ashamed because I was not . . . incognito, you know? I wasn’t a normal student . . . from that point on. I felt as though every eye was on me . . . and I didn’t feel comfortable with people knowing that, because then I didn't know how easy it would be for them to treat me as a normal student. . . . I wasn’t aware that the professor knew that I had a past. So it was a shock to me. . . . I knew [some staff]
knew [and] that was fine because they were there to support us. But I did not know that
the professors would know because I thought that would impinge upon our grades or how
they would perceive our performance, so I was concerned about that. . . . Initially I was
under the impression that we were going to be treated as normal people on the campus.

Another participant recounted a similar experience in which a new director of the Colson
Scholarship actually called his professors and let them know of his status as a Colson Scholar. He
explained this act as a form of betrayal:

I thought that was extremely inappropriate. . . . You change the dynamic of the classroom
setting between the instructor and that individual potentially instantly because you are
implying that there may be a reason to look at them differently. And there’s a stigma,
potentially, that you produce there and you've contaminated the relationship—totally
uncalled for. It’s different if something’s occurred and then you’re having conversations.
But in this case, I had already been there [for] years. . . . It was a total violation in my
view. The Colson Scholarship had actually agreed to pay for my master’s as well, but at
that point . . . I said, “I’ll pay for it myself,” and I withdrew the authorization for them to
be able to discuss my Chuck Colson relationship in any way. That was how serious a
breach of confidence that was.

Likewise, John reported that his Colson Scholar status poisoned a faculty interaction that
caused irrevocable damage to his stay at Wheaton. Afterwards, he reported becoming more
withdrawn, his grades suffering, and battling with lingering questions. The experience was
nothing short of a crisis of faith:

It was in a New Testament Criticism course and it was my first exposure to [such
questioning]. . . . I was in a crisis of belief in a sense because my faith had never been
undermined. I had never been read this stuff, never been exposed. . . . My question to him was, “I need help. I don’t know how to deal with this emotionally. . . . My faith is being shaken. I need something to firmly hold to—how do you deal with this?” And his answer to me—he found out I was a Colson Scholar and he had a foster daughter that was a troubled child and he projected that on me and said—“You just want to be spoon-fed. You just want the answers.” That was just his perception [but] that wasn’t what I was asking. . . . [I just] didn’t have the tools to sit back objectively and not get taken in emotionally, and to assess the information of the data and then to provide a thoughtful critique of my own without being affected by it in terms of my faith. So he didn’t understand all those dynamics that were going on with me; all he knew was I was a convict and I wasn’t going to try. . . . That really crushed me to get that from a professor who is there to mentor me and train me and equip me. I took that as a real slap in the face and condescension. . . . He really didn’t take the time that I think he may have had he not known that I was a Colson Scholar. . . . I just floundered through the whole course and I got an “F”. . . . That was the beginning of the end in terms of my enjoyment, because not only [did I have] all these other pressures, but now my grades are being affected. Because I was doing well at first . . . [but] I left with these wavering questions that never were answered until now, now that I’m in [a graduate program years later].

There were as many opinions as there were Colson Scholars interviewed as to whether or not faculty knew participants’ Colson Scholar status, and how that may or may not have impacted faculty evaluations of them or their work. At least two participants said that their knowledge that a professor had learned of their Colson Scholar status made the atmosphere feel, for them, less supportive, and the previous account illustrate the dynamics surrounding those disclosures around
which, at least in the last three cases, involved faculty members learning of participants’ Colson Scholar status in ways in which were outside of the control of the Scholars interviewed.

Although participants did not necessarily provide specific evidence that faculty negatively evaluated them as a result of learning their Colson Scholar statuses, the Colson Scholars interviewed did describe serious scrutiny, discomfort, and surprise that this information about them had been disclosed to faculty outside of their own decisions to share it. Likewise, none of the participants ever mentioned that they perceived any of this information-sharing as violations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

There do appear to be a serious of contrasts between Nate’s negative account of disclosure and the other participants’ accounts. Nate disclosed to students; faculty members comprised the audiences in the other three cases. Nate had control over his disclosure and chose to disclose; the others had no control over their status having been shared with others in the scenarios provided and it appears evident that they would not have shared the information if given the opportunity to choose. This is also important because it means that Nate had a chance to control not only the timing of what was shared by also the content while the others were not even privy to all that had been shared about them. Also, Nate’s disclosure occurred away from the campus on a trip while the others occurred in the local Wheaton campus context.

**Outcomes of Their Wheaton Education**

In addition to the significant financial contribution the Colson Scholarship afforded the interviewees, their Wheaton College experience enriched them in other ways. Tasked to report any benefits they believed their education at Wheaton provided them, participants reported notable results in four distinct areas: development, respect, exposure to a Christian faith community, and graduation (see Table 5).
Table 5

Outcomes of Colson Scholars’ Higher Education Experiences (RQ4)

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<th>Categories</th>
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<td>Development</td>
<td>Faith and Worldview Development</td>
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<td>Identity Development</td>
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<td>Relational and Emotional Development</td>
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<td>General Content Knowledge Development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professional and Ministerial Development</td>
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<td>Respect of Employers/Co-workers</td>
<td>Increased Marketability/Salary</td>
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<td>Accessed Professional Employment</td>
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<td>Enhanced Leadership Profile</td>
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<td>Heightened Ministry Effectiveness</td>
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<td>Exposure to a Christian Faith Community</td>
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**Development.** Philosophers and researchers have written volumes about the outcomes of higher education in general, and areas of college student development in particular. The Colson Scholars interviewed perceived gains in five areas: faith and worldview development; identity development; relational and emotional development; general content knowledge development; and professional and ministerial development, and attributed those to their Wheaton College experiences.

**Faith and worldview development.** Participants consistently reported that their experiences at Wheaton College bolstered their faith, resulting in worldview formation from a biblical and theological perspective. They not only spoke of ways in which Wheaton provided access to the tools, time, and environment for such development, but they explained worldview formation as the growing capacity to answer the “big questions” in life (Parks, 2000).

Answering the big questions is integrally tied to worldview development. What the Germans called *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, Funk (2001) defined as “the set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of Reality that ground and influence all one’s perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing” (para. 11). Several participants described this “worldview formation” or “worldview
development” as accompanying, and inseparable, from their “faith development” as one of the primary outcomes they perceived from their time at Wheaton. This type of development is also an intentionally repeated goal that permeates the fiber of Wheaton College.

[Wheaton professors] talked about spiritual formation quite a bit, so I knew that it wasn’t just about the learning—it was about the overall picture. The term they used is “faith and learning”; it was always that. That was in the forefront of our minds. And we did the devotions in class, and the professors prayed for the students. . . . You know, that’s not common. So it gave me a sense of purpose and it kind of completes something that was missing there for a long time and answers a question for me . . . [from] when I was 12, “Why am I even here?” And that’s one of the major worldview questions people ask. . . . Wheaton has helped to shape me in that way. . . . You never know what change you can make in somebody’s life through education. [John]

Nate added that it was specifically through exposure to deep, passionate, critical theological thinking that Wheaton College intentionally sought to give its students the tools to feel comfortable applying theology to life in order to answer these ultimate questions and biblically inform their worldviews.

The spiritual formation that I received as a result of my education at Wheaton is—it’s priceless. The very way that I think about life was really formed through my being exposed to critical thinking, critical theological thinking, and deep and passionate theological thinking. . . . I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t gone to school. . . . As a result of researching and reading the ancient authors and the early church fathers, and really seeing how the work of theology was done over a long period of time, and being able to know that you can stake your life on it, that has changed me. As
opposed to before I went to Wheaton . . . I was really full of passion and zeal, but no knowledge.

Prior to attending Wheaton, these participants generally had an underdeveloped understanding of a faith-centric worldview. The Scholars interviewed routinely acknowledged that aiding worldview formation was a significant part of what their Wheaton College education did for them. Alpha elaborated on the “big questions” (Parks, 2000):

Going to Wheaton . . . helps you grasp and wrestle with those questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Who is God, and what role does that play in my life? What am I supposed to do with this life? And it helped answer some of those questions and equipped you to be able to think and understand the world that you live in and how it works, if you will. . . . A Wheaton College education . . . that’s one of the things it’s done. It’s enabled me to . . . answer the theological questions of who we are and what God is requiring of us. Evident in these statements is growth in theological awareness, critical thought, and feelings of having answered deep and abiding “big questions.”

Faith development, for the Colson Scholars interviewed, meant that their educational experiences caused their faith to grow and increasingly enabled them to apply that faith to various life situations. Jonah said, “My faith . . . the College has just enlarged that in such a way that I’m not even sure I can measure it.” Nate also described how his experiences and faith-related encounters at Wheaton had a continued and pervasive effect on his faith development:

Everything . . . challenged my faith, informed my faith, convicted my faith, and stretched my faith, in various ways. And again, it affects every way I think in my life today because of the information . . . and the challenges and the knowledge [to which] I was exposed.
Alpha reiterated that a Wheaton education continues to help a Scholar live by his faith even after moving out of the higher education transition: “Once you leave the Wheaton bubble . . . you transition to the real world and you take all that stuff you had there and apply it. . . . That [faith] is still able to maintain you and keep you on course.”

Identity development. Identity development was another significant developmental outcome for the Colson Scholars interviewed. They related the ways in which Wheaton either helped them become more secure in their identities or allowed them to redefine themselves as changed individuals and individuals worthy of investment.

Identity affirmed. Jonah spoke of the way his Wheaton encounters bolstered his identity and helped him embrace who he is:

The experiences here . . . really helped me to kind of remain true to who I am and where I came from. So I think the experiences, they’ve been positive in the way in which they’ve helped me to just even think about identity, culture, and difference. . . . The school experience helped me to secure that identity a little bit more.

On the other hand, for those participants who reported identity development as a redefined sense of self, there were two identifiable strains: self as a genuinely changed individual and self as an individual worthy of investment.

Self redefined as a genuinely changed individual. For Colson Scholar participants, their receipt of the scholarship and their subsequent educational experiences redefined them, in one participant’s words, “as a changed individual.” In other words, the opportunity allowed participants to come into their own identities as truly changed individuals, and it afforded students and faculty an opportunity to encounter genuine positive change in ways in which they might not
have been accustomed to thinking of or viewing change. John described how the overall experience shifted his thinking:

It helped me to think of myself as a changed individual. . . . Once you go to a school like that, it really defines you, if that makes sense. I know that you’re not supposed to define yourself by your accomplishments or what you do, but in a sense that does give you a level of a description of who you are, having gone through that . . . [and seeing your own] tenacity, hard work, dedication, stress.

*Self redefined as worthy of investment.* Participants understood what Wheaton had invested in them and spoke at length about not wanting to squander or waste that investment. This helped them value themselves and see themselves as worthy. For example, John shared, “As far as Wheaton, I would say it’s really defined me as a person who is a worthwhile individual. I would say it means that I’m a person who’s worth investing in, you know?” Kenneth explained what this dynamic means for scholarship benefactors:

It means that the investments that others have made in me, or on me, have not been done in vain. That’s important because, you know, people want to know that the intended investment that they did in you was not wasted. . . . So it’s just as an encouragement to [them].

*Relational and emotional development.* Relational and emotional development is another outcome this group of interviewees reported. Specifically, the Colson Scholarship offered the participants the time and safe space they needed to learn or relearn how to connect emotionally with others and to accept others’ love for them.
Nate provided a clear example of this developmental outcome:

[God] didn’t remove from me the side effects of the brokenness, like the loneliness and the inability to emotionally connect to other people . . . but God gave me the opportunity and the time and the place to learn how to be a friend and to be loved. . . . I wanted to be able to really love and genuinely care for somebody without having to manipulate them. . . . I think that was probably the most important thing that I took away from it, that I was able to learn to love people and to let people love me in return—and to let it be genuine without thinking that there were some strings attached—which in my former community [the drug subculture], there was always something attached to it.

John echoed some of these ideas about the emotional changes that occurred for him at Wheaton as he described opening himself up to others and experiencing their love.

Once I let go and experienced their response, it helped me to really appreciate people more. . . . As an ex-criminal, you don’t want to be rejected, you want to be treated like a redeemed person. . . . [They] embraced me and loved me, so emotionally speaking, it helped me to realize I’m not always going to be rejected. . . . Not only was I not rejected, I was embraced for the first time, and it really opened up some deep friendships.

As Nate and John both noted, a natural consequence of the emotional development outcome is the development of relationships with others. The relationships that the Colson Scholars interviewed consistently mentioned as persisting and mutually beneficial were relationships with other students and Colson Scholars, with faculty, and with the broader Wheaton network.

Relationships with other students. I have considered the Colson Scholar participants’ divergent views of other students in some detail earlier in the findings; still, persisting
relationships with other students is a relationship outcome that surfaced as a theme significant to several of the interviewees. Nate spoke about the longevity of these relationships:

I'm so thankful the majority of my friends that I communicate with today are all my Wheaton friends, and watching their lives, grow and change and stuff... and the camaraderie that you make, the life-long friends that you make.

*Relationships with faculty.* Other mutually beneficial and persistent relationships the participants noted were their relationships with faculty. Two participants specifically mentioned how their past experiences gave them opportunities to help faculty members with their own troubled children. Nate recalled the following:

One of my professors was struggling with his adopted daughter because she kept running away. So he was always calling me up and saying, “How can I help her?” And, “What would you do? What has happened in your life that was like this?”

John recounted a similar situation in which his story communicated a message of hope to a faculty member:

One professor... mentioned that he had a troubled son. I thought everybody at Wheaton, there was no, you know, no one experienced trouble or anything. And so he was encouraged by my testimony because he said, “There is hope. Because if you can change, having gone through what you went through, then my son can change and there's hope.”

Yet another interviewee spoke of the cordiality of Wheaton’s faculty members that eased relationship-building:

A few faculty... went out of their way to reach out to me and welcome me. ... I use the words, “I felt ostracized,” but I would probably say that wasn't in the mind of most of the people that I met there.
All of these relationships were important, but none was as far-reaching as the relationships Colson Scholars made within the greater Wheaton network.

*Relationships with the Wheaton network.* The relationships the Colson Scholar participants made during their time at Wheaton with other students, administration, and members of the faculty continued to have a persistent reach long after they left Wheaton. However, no relationships they built had more potential to help them leverage the fringe benefits (Astin, 1999) that a Wheaton education could provide than the development of their relationship with the greater Wheaton network.

Connecting to the Wheaton College-affiliated network could provide participants with ministry and employment contacts as well as potential references who could deconstruct some of the barriers complicating ex-offenders’ reentry processes. Alpha offered such an example:

The education has also been instrumental in other things that I have been able to accomplish in terms of breaking those barriers of resistance. . . . A lot of people that may have desire for a profession potentially after having had something in the past, they just don't know how to get beyond that. . . . [Now I have a] packet of information with all of the success and all the licensure that I've already received that attests to character. So the importance [is real] for someone that has come from a background of a conviction and then tried to assimilate back into society.

Jonah even reported that something as seemingly inconsequential as his email address had opened doors for him:

The administration allowed us to keep our e-mail addresses [and] that’s the one I use. . . . The name [Wheaton], I mean, it’s a stamp . . . that helps to springboard you in conversations. . . . In certain communities it’s going to mean much more than others.
The network within Wheaton itself really helped build some relationships. . . . It helps to give you a little bit more exposure to groups that probably wouldn’t receive you otherwise. Kenneth also noted the value of these new contacts for the purpose of ministry networking and donor development, enabling him to “pursue and share the vision God gave me.”

**General content knowledge development.** Perhaps the outcome most commonly associated with a college education is increased knowledge of content, both general and specific. Each participant noted gains in both types of content knowledge, and one participant uniquely referred to this gain in overall knowledge as “inventory increase.” The Colson Scholar participants described exposure to new ways of thinking through classroom instruction, conversation, reading, and travel that added to the depth and breadth of their knowledge. Jonah described the effect of this exposure:

> Education helps to kind of shift the way in which you think about life or even situations in general. And so for me, it was wanting to be exposed to new ideas, new ways of thinking. I knew if I went to an institution, I would run into other people who would be able to stimulate me in conversation. I knew that I would be challenged to learn things that I had otherwise no information about. So I really just wanted to go for the sake of learning, really. . . . Being at Wheaton College helped me to kind of broaden my scope a bit. I actually traveled with some of the different groups during the summers. I did internships. . . . It was just so much exposure . . . volumes that I was exposed to that I didn’t know existed . . . an inventory increase.

Alpha echoed John’s ideas about the value of a Wheaton College education for opening the mind:
Interacting with material educationally, obviously it’s stretching you and broadening your horizons in your mental perceptions. . . . People, as they get opportunities to be introduced to other ways of thinking and perceiving, there's an opportunity for change to occur.

When you look at our society today, we’re so busy with all this data input . . . that we don’t have time to sit back and think and reflect. And when you encounter people that are thinking people, like you do in an educational institution, you’re confronted with ways of thinking and information that has a potential impact of changing people.

It is clear from these participants’ statements that a Wheaton college education meant not only exposure to and growth in a breadth of content knowledge but also growth in critical thinking and reflection upon that increased knowledge in ways that greatly enhanced their perceptions and values.

*Professional and ministerial development.* Participants reported gains in professional development along two lines: an increase in (a) professional and/or (b) ministry preparation. For those entering secular fields, increased professionalism was important to the transition because it continued to distance the participant from his past; for those entering ministerial fields, the preparation during their time at Wheaton was instrumental in giving them the skills they needed to understand theological concepts in order to both develop quality materials and teach these theological concepts to others.

*Increased professional preparation.* The breadth of knowledge and exposure previously mentioned was merely one goal of participants’ higher education pursuits. For example, Jonah spoke of Wheaton’s assistance in helping him to “almost redefine myself in the role that I was in. . . . It really didn’t change what I do, but I think it put a layer of comprehension on top of it.” John echoed that sentiment:
Wheaton College gave me a level of professionalism that I didn’t have prior to going. In fact, when I went to Wheaton, my goal was to get to that next level of education to hopefully propel me in higher directions. . . . It was just building upon something I was starting to establish. . . . It represents a milestone in my life that took me to that next level of transition to wherever God is leading me in ministry and in life.

Likewise, Alpha noted that his Wheaton College education enabled him to “help assimilate into society, pursue professional credentialing and desires that I had to provide for my family and participate within society in professional fields.”

**Increased ministerial preparation.** In addition to an added layer of professional preparation, the participants’ statements revealed that they also perceived their higher education experiences at Wheaton to have added a layer of preparation for ministry. For example, Kenneth described higher education as a “vehicle through which I [became] much better equipped” for ministry. Likewise, Jonah added the following:

> Those conversations that I’ve had here, some of the authors that I’ve been exposed to, have really given me the opportunity now to put together comprehensive Bible studies in a way that I can refer people to other material. . . . I feel really comfortable sitting down and reading through some hard material because they kind of push you to make you get through that material here. And so it was rewarding.

**Respect of Employers/Co-workers.** The Colson Scholars interviewed described a college education as a “ticket to respect” that could open doors of opportunity. Participants believed the completion of their Wheaton education engendered respect for them in others’ eyes. Specifically, they expressed that the Wheaton College degree created opportunities for them by highlighting positive aspects of their character—specifically discipline, humility, perseverance,
credibility, and awareness—to future employers and ministry partners. They believed that newfound respect indirectly increased their marketability, justified their current salary or a higher salary, gave them an enhanced leadership profile, and heightened their ministerial effectiveness.

For example, John described how his education would provide him with social capital before future employers:

[Education] is one of those things that offsets you having been in trouble. When you get that education you've shown that you can be disciplined, you can be taught, you can stick to something and complete it. . . . You get to be exposed to other people and other ideas . . . and those things are nothing but positives when you put that on your resume. Nate generalized the value of the Wheaton network, expanding it to all Wheaton students: “A Wheaton College bachelor's degree opens . . . doors regardless of your GPA.”

Kenneth described how education fostered respect for him in the eyes of others and resulted in expanded ministry opportunities for him:

Every door that has been opened . . . is because I came to Wheaton. [Higher education] is a ticket and people will respect you just because you have the degrees. . . . It gave me credibility. . . . I mean, I really needed to be ordained by a reputable denomination.

Jonah further explained why earning such respect was important to him from the start:

Credit for [learning] as other people might see it, seemed like the next right step for me. [I had] kind of hit a ceiling so to speak. I do the work; I’m good at it—but if I were to write something, who listens? . . . So part of it was just trying to be more recognized. When you really have something powerful to say, I just believe people are more likely to listen [if you have] an education.
Increased marketability/salary. Participants reported gains in both marketability and earning potential because of their Wheaton College experiences. In fact, Alpha reported his education was “very effective” in helping him seek post-graduation employment; however he insisted that he had “never had a problem obtaining a job.” Following graduation, he was able to transition into a role as an executive leader in a “ministry with about one billion dollars in assets, 100 employees [and] with 300 people in a program ministry setting.”

John similarly gave his education an eight-out-of-ten in terms of preparing him for post-graduation employment:

I got recruited while I was in Wheaton, and that was the best job I ever had, so it seems as though the education was the correlation between better jobs—and that was kind of the goal anyway as far as professionally speaking. I had to take a step back [in salary when I went] to Wheaton, and then I got recruited and then I got a really good job when I graduated. . . . I do think when people look at your education, that helps them to factor in how you may be a better fit for a position. . . . I think the education really was a plus. It set me apart.

Like John, others interviewed generally reported finding that their education helped them either to better justify their current salary, obtain a raise, or obtain a more lucrative job.

Accessed professional employment. One participant described the challenges surrounding offender reentry following a criminal offense as “roadblocks,” and said he suffered many roadblocks as he attempted to earn professional licenses (e.g., certified public accountant, real estate agent, etc.) across several fields. Over time, this participant was encouraged to find that his education sometimes allowed him to bypass these roadblocks, allowing him to enjoy full membership in professional groups without having to overcome additional obstacles associated
with his criminal background. He said, for example, “A Wheaton College education . . . enabled me to assimilate into society, pursue professional credentialing and desires that I had to provide for my family, [and] participate within society in professional fields.”

Shaun also viewed his Wheaton education as indispensable to his ability to get where he is today:

[Education] provides some kind of credibility. . . . Long story short, it really, really benefits those who took or will take it seriously. There’s no way in the world, with my criminal background, that I should be in the position or positions that I’ve held and the position that I’m in now. But enough distance has been between me and my past, and being a graduate of Wheaton College, too, I think helped greatly.

**Enhanced leadership profile.** Another outcome participants mentioned was that receiving their degrees enhanced their leadership profiles within their ministries or places of employment, especially for the one participant who returned to his previous employment, a position in prisoner reentry ministry. His skills in counseling, teaching, and leadership began to be recognized:

People believe that I know how to help folks make the transition [and they] ask me for counsel and advice on issues. So because I’ve been we’re I have been . . . people feel, I think, more comfortable with me doing workshops and seminars and Bible studies. . . . So I think it helped to define me as one of those people that could potentially lead the ministry. [Jonah]

**Heightened ministry effectiveness.** Scholars interviewed communicated that they felt an increase in ministry effectiveness following their Wheaton College education. Jonah added his thoughts on how the pursuit of higher education at Wheaton equipped him to do the work of ministering to others.
[My education] helps me to make sure that people are at least doing a proper job teaching others. Now, we can totally disagree, but as long as I know you spent the time to study what you have, and I can tell by listening to it, I’ll still allow you to teach [in the ministry I oversee], because there’s room for disagreement. . . . [Wheaton] helped me prepare for that. . . . Trying to think through some of the material . . . helped me to better formulate who I was and then how to respond to others.

Alpha expressed that his college education gave him a set of gateway skills whereby he could minister effectively to others.

A college education obviously enables you to be able to communicate effectively, do good solid research, come up with conclusions, present your positions, and develop analytical skills in terms of how things work in life, and how to accomplish goals. . . . A Wheaton College education . . . that’s one of the things it’s done. . . . [It’s equipped me] to be able to do exploits for God.

As the review of the literature in Chapter II introduced, the skills Alpha mentioned here are classic liberal arts outcomes of higher education (AAC&U, 2005).

**Exposure to a Christian faith community.** The Colson Scholars interviewed also reported experiencing a different culture—one which they described as the Christian culture of Wheaton College’s faith community. The participants described daily interactions with individuals in the faith community as well as exposure to the shared culture of the greater Wheaton community through visits to libraries, music lessons, and their children’s attendance within the local public school system where nearly all teachers were Wheaton College graduates.

John described this aspect: “For our family, it gave them an opportunity to experience a different kind of culture . . . a quality Christian culture. . . . There was a difference between what
you experience in inner city places versus what we experienced at Wheaton.” Similarly, Alpha participant described the environment as one of diversity, intellectual conversation, and love for learning.

**Graduation.** The final outcome that participants mentioned was the quintessential outcome common across all successful completers of a degree-granting educational program—the graduation! Although graduation was significant for participants, they placed higher value on its symbolism for their families. Nate described the importance of that accomplishment for his family:

For my family and my mom to be able to share it, too, and to be able to stand up there and accept a degree, a diploma from the president, after all that I had been through. It was phenomenal, more so for my mom than anybody else, because she saw, I made her suffer so much, just with my life, and, all the terrible choices. I would only call her when I was in prison or in jail. . . . [My family] really had given up on me [and] moved on in their lives . . . [but] it was like, this is what God can do when God gets ahold of a person's life!

John described the impact that the graduation ceremony had on his children as legacy-building:

My children needed to see me graduate and I needed to experience that. . . . I’m sure that was a good moment for them to remember and to think about what’s coming for them in the future. So a lot of it was maybe vicarious, thinking about what impact it would have on my family, more than just me. . . . When kids see their parents doing well and trying in difficult circumstances, I think that enables them to see a part that they wouldn’t see otherwise. And it gives them a level of encouragement. . . . So what does that say about them? What can they accomplish in light of the difficulties or whatever that they
experience or that they see others experience? How can my life feed into theirs? So in some ways my life was . . . building a legacy for my children to look upon and to be encouraged by.

Alpha described the effect of the ceremony on his siblings as most salient:

It definitely impacted [my siblings]. They always look up to me as a role model, and as they saw the things that were happening in my life, there was disbelief in many instances that I could have come from the challenges that I came from or faced in life, moving through the things I was going through, and seeing what God was doing in my life.

Kenneth described that moment as one in which he was simultaneously proud and humble:

When they called my name, even though you’re not supposed to do it, my entire class stood up and gave me a standing ovation. . . . They all broke their own rule. . . . It was a great, humble experience for me because it became real—to have the diploma in my hands was amazing.

It is evident from their statements that the greatest impact on the participants was a vicarious one—the ability to see how the graduation impacted their loved ones. The graduation was paradoxically a proud moment and a humbling milestone. Participants felt proud because they realized the goal for which they had labored so diligently but humbled because they considered the significance of the moment in their families’ eyes, who uniquely knew how far they had come.

Ultimately, for the Colson Scholars interviewed, the receipt of the scholarship allowed them to redeem time and diminish past regrets, and the graduation was the culmination of that achievement. John asserted, “this scholarship has meant, basically, a change in the trajectory of my life in terms of accomplishment, in terms of years that were stolen.” Similarly, Alpha reported that the gift of time to study that the scholarship provided him enabled him to “reclaim
something that I missed . . . [and diminish] that regret list that I hadn’t had a chance to accomplish. . . . Wheaton College, that experience, enabled me to fulfill a longing there of belongingness to what I perceived as normalcy."

These outcomes of development, respect, faith community exposure, and graduation were named by the Colson Scholars interviewed as areas in which they observed benefit from their Wheaton higher education experiences. These outcomes were delivered in a context of campus support services, and Colson Scholars interviewed also described these supports and the extent to which they were helpful or could have been more helpful to them as they persevered in their educational pursuits.

**Supports**

Earlier in this chapter, I sought to demonstrate areas indicative of Scholars’ potential needs for support based on participants’ self-identified liabilities. For Schlossberg (1984), supports could include family or other social networks or individuals that serve a function of affirmation or aid to the individual undergoing the transition, with varying levels of closeness depending on role and history.

**Supports moving in.** The supports Wheaton College provided for the Colson Scholars interviewed took many forms, and the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory trichotomizes that structure: moving in, moving through, and moving out of the transition. During the “moving in” phase of the transition, participants noted that Wheaton College provided support to them in several distinct ways (see Table 6)—the first being a program coordinator who helped solve a range of students’ problems.
Table 6

Ways in which Wheaton College Was or Could Have Been More Supportive (RQ5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supports Moving In</td>
<td>Program Coordinator&lt;br&gt;Faith-Based Mentors&lt;br&gt;Funding to Demonstrate Educational Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports Moving Through</td>
<td>Professors&lt;br&gt;Staff Members&lt;br&gt;Institute for Prison Ministries’ Personnel&lt;br&gt;Other Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports Moving Out</td>
<td>Faculty Members’ Ongoing Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could Have Been More Supportive Moving In</td>
<td>Enhance Career and Academic Advising&lt;br&gt;Enhance Study Skills Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could Have Been More Supportive Moving Through</td>
<td>Restore Control to Post-Release Populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could Have Been More Supportive Moving Out</td>
<td>Cultivate Realistic Expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Program coordinator. The Colson Scholarship benefited from employing the same individual in the role of program coordinator throughout most of the years the scholarship has been in existence. He was mentioned repeatedly in the participant interviews for his significant role in the lives of the participants and was especially important because he was the first Wheaton point of contact for future Colson Scholars. Nate recalled his initial meeting with the coordinator:

[He] was even crying as he was shaking my hand as I was leaving. He was like, “It's been a pleasure and honor to meet you, because I want you to know that this Colson Scholarship was created just for people just like you”. . . . [and] I wept all the way home from Chicago.

One student reported facing severe housing difficulties. However, he and his family have wonderful memories of their time at Wheaton because of the role this scholarship program coordinator played:

[Housing] was the incoming challenge out the gate, but [he] knew exactly what to do every step of the way . . . and that coordinator [is] so vitally important to being able to
meet Scholars’ needs. . . . He moved heaven and earth to do the right things . . . a very unique person, just a wonderful man of God that knew how to minister to me, my family, love on my family . . . because when you come as a married couple, obviously it’s the whole package coming, everybody goes to college. [Alpha]

**Faith-based mentors.** The Colson Scholars interviewed named faith-based mentoring as another support Wheaton provided. Mentors encouraged participants to take ownership of their success in the program, as well as incorporated faith as an aspect of mentoring. John commented on how helpful these mentoring relationships were:

> I had a mentor who helped me along in doing a discipleship program and help[ed] me to be a leader. [Another] just spent time with me. . . . Somebody who’s older and more experienced and loves you and is willing to spend time with you even though you’ve gotten in trouble says, "You know, you’re an important person." Not in a prideful way, but, “[You’re] wanted, loved, thought well of.” That goes a long way in helping you to stay encouraged along the way, when you do get down and out.

Likewise, Nate reported that his mentor “really took me under his wing; he made himself available to me not just as a [mentor] but emotionally available to me as a friend, and his constant encouragement was vital in times of doubt, in times of anxiety.”

Kenneth also reported becoming great friends with his mentor who helped him apply to Wheaton but told him that he had “no room to fail.” Kenneth said that such a charge put the fear of God in me, because I was going to be a pioneer. . . . [He] met with me regularly [and] became my spiritual father. . . . [Another mentor challenged me] to be careful because you could become cynical. . . . He says, “Guard your heart. . . . Don’t let
all this higher academia stuff mess you up with your genuineness of this Gospel.” I’ve never forgotten that; that was real good advice that he gave me.

Jonah spoke glowingly of the mentor ideal and recalled the content of these mentor-scholar meetings:

The mentor ideal is biblically based; I think it really helps people in any regard having an older Christian man that really knew who I was kind of talk to me a lot and say things like, “You can do it. Be encouraged. Don't worry about stereotypes or labels that other people put on you. Be confident. Believe in God.”. . . . We would meet once a week, so we’d usually have a little debrief session to see what was going on, what issues I was having, if there were any, and kind of talk through those. So I think he was a great support. . . . We kind of hit it off and we’ve been laughing and joking since. He came out to my wedding; he has pictures of my daughter. Any time I’m in the Midwest, I actually try to see him.

Jonah reported that his mentor had a balanced perspective about meeting together; he was open to meeting more frequently if Jonah desired, but the mentor also understood if he needed to cancel.

**Funding to demonstrate educational ability.** The scholarship program required the demonstration of academic ability and also funded that education prior to Wheaton, if necessary. While five of the six participants already had college-level credit earned to demonstrate this ability, one participant was funded to “bridge” to Wheaton from a community college near his home. It represented a win-win-win-win in that the scholarship saved money, the participant got his “sea legs” under him to prove himself before coming to Wheaton, risk was mitigated for the Scholarship program, and the participant was able to remain with his familiar home network—turning a liability into an asset—and allowing him to work while earning credits for transfer.

Jonah spoke highly of the value of this support:
The community college year really helped me because I wouldn’t have [been as successful] had I not had that course work. . . . I think I would have made it, but I think they made the better choice because I really hadn’t typed a full paper. . . . I think juggling it that way really put me in position to come into one of the better institutions in the country. So I appreciated their decision.

Jonah did note that he was required to maintain a certain grade point average while at that community college in order to remain eligible for the scholarship.

Nate’s experience demonstrates the willingness on the part of the academic administration to allow conditional academic admission. Nate explained that although the Colson Scholarship accepted him, he was not actually initially admitted as a Wheaton undergraduate due to the fact that his 2.7-2.8 GPA did not meet the 3.0 requirement for transfer students. Nate received a call from the Dean of Academic Affairs who said to him, “I don’t know if you would be able to succeed here at Wheaton.” So he wrote her a “heartfelt letter . . . [asking for a] chance to know if I could be successful or not, because I’d never been afforded the opportunity. And she wrote me back a really sweet letter [saying], “Well, we’re going to let you try.”

**Supports moving through.** Participants also reported that Wheaton College gave them significant support as they moved through their higher education experiences. Interviewees noted the investment of professors, Wheaton College staff, the Institute for Prison Ministries’ staff, and other students as specific supports, as well as noting features of the Colson Scholarship program that provided them with additional support throughout their educational processes.

**Professors.** Colson Scholars interviewed were consistently grateful, and indebted to, faculty for their significant support throughout the process. Sometimes these supports were
simply genuine openness and availability to help them academically and to take the time to teach them basic knowledge they should have already known.

At Wheaton you can talk to your professors. I mean, all my professors wanted to know me and they really went above and beyond to befriend me. I was always dining with professors on campus or visiting them in their homes and with their families off campus. . . . They were all very genuine people, and they really, really want to see you succeed. [Nate]

Kenneth added that professors were willing to take the time to answer his academic questions, discuss expectations outside of class, and even provide early feedback for his academic improvement and success:

Many, many professors helped me out. . . . [I was] always asking for help. . . . I did my best to write the paper [early]. . . . You were allowed to get a ticket to take your professor out to lunch . . . so I made appointments with my professors [and] they were always happy to [review it and] within three, four, five days they gave me the paper with marks on it. . . . I took that, made the changes, gave it to them, and it was usually [an A or a B paper]. . . . So I was able to survive [and even make] the Dean's List two or three times.

Academic help was not the only type of help professors gave. Faculty members provided personal encouragement to the participants by befriending them, praying with them, reminding them how far they had come, inviting them into their homes for meals, and even helping them financially when a special need or opportunity presented itself.

John explained the critical difference that such a high level of faculty support meant to him:
I felt like a failure . . . but [my Greek professor] encouraged me [by] reiterating the impact that I had already had to that point even if I didn’t go on. . . . [She] gave me that boost when I was at a breaking point probably, mentally and emotionally and just her encouragement helped me. . . . [Another time] I remember talking to a professor and I was writing a paper and it was very difficult and I basically got really emotional because I felt inadequate. And he took the time; he let me save face. . . . He showed me how to structure things, things that you should have already known growing up in school, but nobody—you didn’t get exposed to that education. But he took the time to just encourage me and prayed with me right there in his office. And this is a top tier scholar who was well known, who has written books that are published. A person to invest in your life in that way makes a big impact.

Faculty members also provided quality career advising. The role of this counsel was particularly critical for Jonah:

I would go to [my] department [and] would talk to some of the professors and they would tell me different jobs that they thought I would excel in . . . [as well as salary ranges because I] really didn’t understand what qualifies someone to have a certain salary. . . . I [had been committing crime partly because] I didn’t understand that you could actually make a halfway decent salary and live. And so the department really helped me to see if I really was serious about a career [in this field], some of the ways I that could get a job and then let that job experience help me to pursue a master’s, and so I think it was extremely beneficial. [Jonah]

These faculty members’ personal investments, the participants reported, inspired them to do their best and provoked them to devote themselves even more to their educations. As Kenneth
summarized, the faculty members’ contributions to him while he was at Wheaton fueled him “to really invest in the investment that was being invested in me.”

**Staff members.** Although Wheaton faculty had the most mention in the transcripts as supports moving through, Wheaton staff members also offered significant support in the minds of the participants. The Scholars interviewed consistently described them as genuine, available, and gracious supports, especially as they created a wonderful and welcoming environment.

The [staff at Wheaton]—genuine people that have a calling . . . were all extensions of the grace of God and the love of God. [Alpha]

Shaun mentioned several additional supports:

The other [Colson Scholars] in the program . . . [or the] Director for the Office of Multi-Cultural Affairs. There was a gospel choir that was mixed . . . [the director’s] husband was African-American, so he and I used to converse a lot. . . . Those were the small supports that I had.

**Institute for Prison Ministries Personnel.** Participants also named the Institute for Prison Ministries (IPM) staff as a source of direct support, describing them as friendly, welcoming, and available.

The Institute itself was a support. You could always run in and talk to [the Director]; she always kept a door opened, and at the time there was an office manager . . . [who] was real open. She had us over to her house for, one or two of the holidays for meals and stuff like that. And so the entire staff was pretty friendly. [Jonah]

The Colson Scholarship program, overseen by the Institute for Prison Ministries, funded the vast majority of the educational expenses incurred during the years the participants were at Wheaton College. Participants unequivocally reported that IPM administration would fund
anything that constituted credited coursework toward the degree, including both summer study and study abroad. Those funds for summer work enabled interviewees to take lighter loads in the fall and spring, have shorter and more concentrated summer classes, and boost their grade point averages—all of which supported the academic success of the sometimes-struggling participants. As Nate recalled, “The summer programs really help. . . . [The Colson Scholarship] did everything that they could do physically for you to help you succeed. . . . As long as you’re moving toward your degree, they made that happen.”

Even when a Colson Scholar participant failed a class, the recipient reported receiving no negative consequence from IPM leadership, but rather received additional encouragement. Nate said,

I didn’t want to get less than an “A” because I thought that that would be demeaning to the scholarship program—to fail in a course when they’re footing the bill for you to be there, for you to get less than the very best that you could do. . . . Because the tremendous gift that the Colson Program was, to not, to just do your very best was a lot of pressure . . . even though they would pat me on the back and say, “It’s okay.” [Nate]

**Other students.** One participant noted that other students provided a source of tremendous inspiration for him by leaving notes of encouragement for him to persevere through his higher education experiences. These notes were both timely and constant—having a cumulative effect:

Without fail, every time I needed it, God sent somebody into my life to encourage me at just the right time. . . . A student would say, “I’m so glad you’re here. I’m learning so much from your friendship.” And the little notes that students would leave me all the time on my door, just little things . . . they just kept accumulating. [Nate]
Similarly, another participant stated that the “close relationships I had built with a couple of the Colson Scholars kind of helped me to be successful.”

**Supports moving out.** Participants had less to say about the supports they leaned on “moving out” than in the “moving in” and “moving through” phases. Nevertheless, the supports that did persist took the form of continued meaningful relationships with faculty members. The investments of faculty into the lives of the participants were tremendous, and some faculty members even contributed their own financial resources toward these students’ success in ways I cannot reveal and maintain the individual recipients’ confidentialities. Generally speaking, however, these faculty members provided housing between the participants’ moves or money to help with a move, and one faculty member even paid for a participant to attend a specialized institute because of the potential the faculty member saw in him.

Despite the fact that only one participant recidivated, it was in the context of conviction for his crime (thefts committed against Wheaton College, nonetheless) that the participant began to realize the genuineness of the Wheaton faculty and administration. The Scholar recounted how one particular faculty member served as a liaison between himself and the Wheaton College administration:

A faculty member I was close to came to see me, and then after I got out, he kind of mediated [a meeting with me and President Liftin] because the president wanted to know why I was committing burglaries on Wheaton College campus. Was it anything against the school, anything anyone has done to you?. . . . I couldn’t tell [him] why. . . . I don’t know. . . . Surprisingly, he didn’t ban me from campus; he actually told me that. Oddly enough, he not only forgave me, but I think he prayed [for me] at the time, which you know, how small do you feel then?
Ways Wheaton College Could Have Been More Supportive

The rich relationships possible, and realized, between Colson Scholars and their faculty are evident as these relationships provided participants with significant supports in their higher education transitions at Wheaton College. However, as the participants described, Wheaton College could have been more supportive to them as they transitioned in, through, and out of their higher education experiences at Wheaton.

Moving in. Participants mentioned several ways Wheaton College could enhance the Colson Scholarship and better support incoming recipients based on deficiencies they felt or observed. For example, one participant reported being unfamiliar with terms used on the campus and registered for classes out of order because he did not understand what a prerequisite was. He recalled, “Maybe I looked like I knew what I was doing [but I was] in Advanced Sociology, and I didn’t even have 101. I didn’t even know how I got in the class. . . . I had no real experience and they kind of put a stamp of approval on it.” This participant then suggested that assessing each incoming Scholar’s understanding of the collegiate environment and especially college-related jargon, and creating a support system of direct care around him or her in light of those known deficiencies, would “help insure a greater level of success.” The deficiencies the participants felt consistently centered around two specific areas: career/academic advising and study skills help.

Career and academic advising. Participants noted that having intentional career and academic advising on the front end of the scholarship would have improved their experiences. One interviewee questioned the role career-related information might have made in his degree program decision-making:

In hindsight, maybe I could have done something that was little bit more personally marketable for myself. Maybe if I would have had some, maybe a kind of pre-college like
exam to see what are your skill sets, what are you good at, what does this test say you’re
good at, where does this test say that you would fit in occupation-wise. . . . At least it
would give the Scholar an idea of the possibilities [because] as far as having an
immediately marketable education that really limited me. I’m not ungrateful because
again, it was the best years of my life. . . . But other Scholars knew the program was a
stepping stone. . . . They knew the direction they were going or maybe their past wasn’t as
impacted from their mistakes as others. . . . But, yeah, some kind of career assessment.

[Nate]

**Study skills help.** As previously mentioned in the liabilities section, participants
consistently acknowledged their undeveloped or underdeveloped study skills and reported feeling
that enhanced study skills courses could improve their academic success. Although study skills
courses were available, they were not required. Scholars interviewed who did take these courses
opined that they seemed too geared toward time management. Rather than the courses being
helpful, participants reported feeling the courses were “really just one more thing to do.”

John felt that research and writing ought to be part of the focus of study skills courses:

I think that would be good to have a study skills course and a research and writing course
just to give you some preliminary skills and awareness of what you’re getting into,
because when you go to Wheaton, they’re teaching you how to write as though you want
to publish something. . . . Their bar is so high that if you aren’t there, you’re just going to
swim the whole time. . . . So I think a class in preliminary basic—how to take notes, how
to summarize, how to annotate, how to express your thoughts in papers and whatever, just
basic topic sentences, and you know, concluding sentences and . . . things to help people
that didn't get those basic things that everybody should have.
Because ex-offenders as a group have such limited educational backgrounds (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008), such a study skills course may be particularly critical for this group (an idea revisited in the implications section of Chapter V).

**Moving through.** In addition to those supports Wheaton College could have provided to the participants as they transitioned into Wheaton, there were also several opportunities to better serve the interviewees as they moved through their higher education transitions. In fact, the bulk of the comments that the participants made were about this middle period of transition.

Moving through, the participants’ main contention was with the level of control Wheaton exerted over them. Although they understood that the Scholarship should come with some parameters, they did not understand why the institution engaged in what the participants felt to be inflexible scheduling, the prioritization of scholarship representation over time spent directed toward learning activities, and the high level of supervision for individuals who had been out an extended period of time (in some cases over a decade) who believed they had adequately proven themselves.

Even in areas where participants suggested they needed more support, it is possible these supports have increased since the time the students attended Wheaton. Meaning, there may be some instances where supports have positively evolved over time. For example, one of the early-era Scholars who participated in this study mentioned lacking certain supports that are available today:

You know I was the guinea pig. So, they didn’t have too many things in place. After me, they had more support groups and they got the counseling department involved. But when I got here, there was not much really offered to me except encouragement to do a good
job. Of course, I was super motivated, and God’s hand was on it—otherwise I would never have finished. . . . But there was not much support.

**Increasing scheduling flexibility.** More than one participant noted that different aspects of scheduling difficulties made their time at Wheaton harder than it may have needed to be. John specifically recalled that the College refused to work with him regarding the requirement to attend chapel. This hampered his ability to work and resulted in his wife having to find outside employment—something the couple had intentionally avoided due to the significant health concerns of a family member for whom she was primary care-giver. The College’s inflexibility with the participant’s own work scheduling meant he could only work two days per week due to his commute, drastically affecting his ability to work. He explained that “it was a tremendous amount of stress . . . I lost revenue, too, because I had to go to chapel. . . . [Yet] I was already in all these other things getting fed ministry-wise. . . . That imposed a financial strain on us.”

Not only did the inflexible schedule result in financial strain, John said this strain was exacerbated by the fact that the Colson Scholarship had begun to charge Scholars in his era for additional expenses in the program they had understood would be covered. He noted that for some students the shifts might have been minor, but for participants like him, who were supporting a family on campus, the financial stress was nearly overwhelming. Unable to take additional work due to the inflexibility of the campus administrators with his scheduling issues, John explained that

If there were any way that I could have worked around the chapel . . . because I appealed to the dean requesting that I didn’t have to go, and they forced me to go. So it was as if they weren’t thinking about, okay this is a different unique situation, he’s a little further along and maybe he doesn’t need to have this, is this really going to help him or is it going
to hurt him? They were more concerned with my spiritual well-being, but they didn’t think about the practical aspects of how that was going to affect me.

John seemed to say that scheduling conflicts heightened the level of stress Colson Scholars experienced, particularly the frustration involved when the participants perceived certain changes to have been easily performed by school administrators who simply chose not to provide such flexibility.

**Prioritizing learning.** Shaun also noted scheduling issues, but related his conflict more to his perception of the Colson Scholarship program placing priority on his representing the program over completing his coursework. He recalled that

First and foremost, you were a Colson Scholar . . . and then you were a student. At a whim you could be called by the director of the program at the time and told, “We’re doing this or we're doing that, or we’re going here or we’re going there.” And so that was, of course, outside of my control. . . . No matter what responsibilities you may have here or there . . . [you were] unable to afford it on your own so you almost had to do what you were told. . . . To me at the time it felt more like show-boating . . . as opposed to giving us opportunities to do something ministry-related. . . . I don’t think that we had enough opportunity outside of just being trophies. . . . Many of our experiences [were] not necessarily something to continue helping us to progress and transition even after Wheaton College. . . . Most of our exposure in the Colson Program as scholars was just a means of putting us on display.

John also argued that additional mandated activities, even when they were positive things, felt “like performances to avoid punishment. . . . [Extracurricular] requirements and stipulations, tended to create a little bit of animosity.” While these comments are critical of the program’s
pervasive presence, not all Colson Scholars interviewed shared such sentiments. The negative
comments that were received seemed to couple the idea of the learning de prioritization with a
recurrent feeling being over-supervised.

**Lessening supervision.** Participants also spoke disparagingly about Wheaton College’s
refusal to place more trust in their abilities to supervise themselves. The intense scrutiny these
Scholars reported feeling seemed to them to be unnecessary as in most cases the participant had
been out of prison multiple years, and all had demonstrated post-release success. John understood
the need for heightened observation in certain situations, but he felt that such a high level of
oversight should be congruent with a given Scholar’s proven trajectory. John considered the
pressure unnecessary in light of the fact that he had been out nine years and had a family:

> There was a tremendous amount of pressure to be a model citizen. . . . The director at the
time was always coming down on us [but] I was already used to independence and self-
supervision. . . . I felt like I was put back under that oppression, and privileges were
taken. . . . I felt a lot of stress during that time that I probably . . . would not have
experienced in other places.

In summary, Scholar participants named three specific ways that Wheaton could have
provided more support to them during their “moving through” phase at Wheaton College. All
three, (a) increasing scheduling flexibility, (b) prioritizing learning over Scholarship program
representation, and (c) lessening supervision are all codes supporting the overarching category of
this moving out phase: “Restore Control to Post-Release Populations.” According to the
participants’ comments, it appears that the extent to which Wheaton restores to future Colson
Scholars personal control of their lives is the same extent to which future Scholars can also
believe the college is supportive of their new identities as changed individuals and not just individuals worthy of investment.

Moving out. Finally, Colson Scholar participants spoke of ways in which Wheaton College could have been more supportive during their higher education pursuits at the point of “moving out” of the transition. From Wheaton, they had long envisioned plans to pursue the realization of their dreams whether in ministry, secular employment, graduate education, or some other endeavor.

High expectations created tremendous pressure to achieve. Upon moving out of Wheaton, participants recounted tremendous pressure to succeed in a “Chuck Colson-size” way in prison ministry. However, Nate asserted that there was something unique about Chuck Colson, given his political networking experience, which would likely not be true of Scholars coming from vastly different or less politically-influential backgrounds: “The measure of the program’s success [is that] it has graduates. . . . Now are these people going out to be Chuck Colsons of the world? Probably not.”

Participants still reported sensing a tremendous amount of pressure to achieve “rock star-level” success moving out of their Wheaton experiences (Figure 2 expresses the essence of the Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out phases). Within the third phase, Moving Out, an identifiable pattern emerged into seven-stages recognizable across all participants (see Figure 3). This model demonstrated what the phenomenon of being a Colson Scholar was like for these participants, specifically in light of the pressure the Colson Scholarship created for them during the moving in, moving through, and moving out periods of their transition.
Figure 2

*Model of the Essence of the Colson Scholars’ Higher Education Transition*

**The model.** Participants unequivocally felt pressure to be ministry wave-makers or the “next Chuck Colsons.” The model captures participants’ shared reflections on this pressure as they moved into, through, and especially out of the Colson Scholarship program and into the real world in order to attempt to realize those expectations (the different shades exist only to visually differentiate between stages). Since participants continue to grapple with the effects of that high pressure even today, it seems apropos to identify and situate the model here, in the moving out phase, before transitioning into a summary of the entire findings section. (However, this model should be understood to be representative of the overall Colson Scholar essence as is further explained in Chapter V).
The seven stages I identified as participants described their experiences moving out of Wheaton were leaving with high expectations, experiencing real-world conflict with those expectations, questioning the pragmatism of those expectations, deconstructing those expectations, reconstructing new ones, struggling with guilt due to the reconstruction of their expectations and struggling with patience due to their delayed timelines, and finally, concluding that positively affecting the life of at least one other person is worthy of their educational investment. Although these stages could generally be identified equally well across all participants, for the sake of space, I present only the clearest statement (or statements) to embody a particular stage.

**Participant leaves Wheaton with high expectations.** Participants consistently reported leaving Wheaton with high expectations and felt that the Colson Scholarship led all Scholars to exit the college with lofty goals and aspirations. For some participants, these expectations took
the form of ministries they believed they would be able to enter or begin, graduate education they believed they would enter following Wheaton, and criminal justice reforms they thought they would be able to influence or help lead as an ex-offender representative.

Alpha felt the program itself perpetuated such high expectations, and said that in the “settings that I was in, I heard something to the effect . . . [that they] want to extend a scholarship to the cream of the crop—one that’s going to be a renowned evangelist that’s going to change the world.” He felt that the pressure could be traced to limited scholarship resources and “trying to determine how you allocate resources to get an actual return back.”

Nate described how this aspect affected him individually, but felt his sentiment was also representative of the other participants involved:

You leave there with very high expectations. And you’re not immune to that because of the kind of education that you are afforded there, and the kinds of things that you see people moving on and into. . . . With the opportunity to be a Colson Scholar came an expectation in my head that maybe wasn’t really realistic . . . that this was going to be a springboard or stepping stone to some other kind of ministry. . . . And it kind of got off to a good start but with the education came the expectation that if they’re affording you the education, that somehow you’re going to go off and use that. And that’s what the whole premise of it is, to help men and women, former felons, become leaders.

**Participant’s real world conflicts with those expectations.** These participants generally ended their time at Wheaton full of zeal to accomplish these high expectations and to engage in the ministries that awaited them on the horizon. In this stage however, as they began to seek to solidify relationships, seek employment, and seek ministry opportunities, they often found themselves sidetracked, averted, or otherwise delayed.
Nate’s expectation that he would be able to enter a church in a teaching ministry capacity or enter a correctional ministry did not come to fruition; he soon realized that the local church seemed disinterested in his credentials and that a well-established network of related individuals controlled the correctional ministry in his geographical area. John, who had planned to enter the ministry upon his graduation but took secular employment to provide for his family, described the jarring letdown of this stage: “Getting out of Wheaton was kind of going into the valley. . . . It was bittersweet, because I’m finishing this course of study but I’m still not in this trajectory of ministry. . . . It kind of set me back in terms of that ministry goal.”

For some participants, real-world conflicts and setbacks related to how they prioritized education among multiple immediate and simultaneous life goals. Jonah, for example, had wished to pursue further study upon his Wheaton graduation, but realizing that he and his girlfriend were entering their mid-thirties, they felt the time was right for getting engaged and married, purchasing a home, and having children, rather than pursuing graduate school immediately. He considered these goals merely delayed: “[Having more children, beginning graduate school, writing for publication, etc.] are still goals. . . . We make a lot of plans and life happens. . . . There was just so much that I really hadn’t done yet . . . . Education just kind of lost to priority.”

Another participant came to Wheaton as a single student and began dating a woman who later became his wife. However, shortly after their marriage he discovered that his wife was still seeing her previous husband. He moved out and was hurt to find that some people turned their back on him because they thought he should try to stay and work it out with her. All of this drama took its toll on his academic career. Ultimately, he reported, “She filed for divorce [and] she remarried her second husband. . . . Had I remained single, I may have [gone] on straight to a
doctoral program instead of getting sidetracked.” Instead, he reported that this incident changed his trajectory: “I lost a lot of faith in people. . . . It affected my faith [and] dampened that passion. . . . Had I left prison and continued with that same blaze that I had when I left, I probably would have entered the ministry and be [there] right now.”

**Participant questions pragmatism of expectations.** In this stage, the natural tendency of participants who faced such a discrepancy between their expectations and reality was to begin to question how realistic those expectations had been initially. Nate questioned the realism of his post-graduation expectations with these words:

> At the time I was 53 and, gee whiz, I don’t know anybody that’s hiring a middle-aged guy to be their teaching pastor with no, little to no experience and a criminal background like mine. So, it just seemed to be the more I thought about it . . . it was, kind of an outrageous expectation. . . . [Maybe] I was just being selfish to think that I could be competent enough to be a shepherd. . . . Is that coming from my selfishness because I think that my story has merit for other people? That’s what I struggle with. But isn’t the story of the Gospel, just [people] telling their stories of how they met Jesus and what He did for them and how it’s changed their lives?

**Participant deconstructs initial expectations.** Participants in this stage began to question the Colson Scholarship’s administrators and the pressures that created unrealistic expectations for the average Scholar. Alpha rhetorically questioned the scholarship’s committee members:

> As you’re creating scholarships . . . what are you looking for? Are you looking for someone that's going to come in and take that education and speak to ten thousand or hundreds of thousands? Are you looking for a rock star? Is that the requirement for the scholarship recipient? Is that what we're looking for in those people? Or are we looking
for changing one life at a time? Often we look for those grandiose
accomplishments . . . but I think that's actually the wrong mindset.

**Participant reconstructs expectations.** In this stage, participants began to reconstruct
their expectations, emphasizing quality over quantity. For example, Alpha elaborated on what he
believed the reconstructed mindset should be—ordinary people impacting one life. He said, “You
never know what impact that one life will have. . . . Sometimes if you’re looking for that—
exceptional star—you miss out on what really is God’s heart. . . . Sometimes you’ll get rock stars
and they have their place, but that’s not normative.

Kenneth realized that reconstructing his original goal—becoming a prison chaplain—was
imperative. He originally had planned to enter the federal chaplaincy upon his graduation from
Wheaton, but soon realized correctional populations needed him most in post-release residential
ministry instead. He noted that

97% of people who are locked up and are going to get out someday. . . . The most
neglected ministry in America is post-prison ministry. If you’re an ex-convict you know
it. . . . That’s why I never went into the chaplaincy.

Nate met his future wife after Wheaton and learned she had a particularly fatal form of
cancer. In spite of that fact, he believed that God had given him the direction he sought in his
opportunity to love and care for her and married her despite the prognosis. Although she is now
unable to speak, he had this to say about his reconstructed expectations:

When I met [my wife], I just met an incredible person. . . . Knowing [her] has been the
best ever experience of my life. . . . Yeah I regret that I’m not in the position right now to
use my degree. But I wouldn’t trade loving [her] for anything in the world. . . . When I
met her, I knew that God wanted me to care for her. And so, I mean, that became more
important to me than anything else. . . . I knew that that was my next ministry. . . . I believe God’s got me right where I'm most needed. And that’s always been my only prayer. . . . I’m just trying to be patient waiting on God. It’s not always easy in our world of do-it-yourself. But I know that God is more than able, so I have to concede to His timing and not my own.

Jonah also reported that although his initial goal is still important to him, it is not as important to him as caring for his family. He said, “I still want to pursue it, but it has its place. I want to see my daughter crawl a bit. . . . And then I probably won’t go back to school until next year. That’s the aim. Take a course, see if I’m still extremely interested, and then try and finish up.” For Shaun, the importance of reconstructing his expectations from religious ministry work to “getting caught up in social services” work was not only a labor of love but also an avenue through which he was “really trying to do some self-diagnosis . . . [and] self-exploration.”

**Participant struggles with guilt and patience.** In this stage, as evident in the participants’ comments, they unilaterally struggled with recurring guilt and a lack of patience as they considered their reconstructed expectations. The guilt they felt seemed to stem primarily from feeling that they had not lived up to the enormity of the Colson Scholar investment on their behalf or were not living up to the Colson Scholarship’s or Wheaton College’s expectations for them.

Nate described the ongoing struggle he felt to live up to investment made in him and yet not feel guilty about where God has placed him:

I still struggle with it a lot because the Colson Scholarship Program was $97,000 for a 3 1/2 year education, and I feel like I . . . a lot of times, I struggle with guilt because I feel like I’m not doing anything with that, and so I feel like maybe that would have been better spent on somebody else. . . . We live in a culture that it’s almost like you feel guilty if you
tell your friends what you're doing because it's not grandiose things like they're doing, or like maybe you expected at one time. And so you almost feel guilty. And there’s no reason to feel guilt because, my goodness, you don’t have to live a high-powered life to live a life pleasing to the Lord! You don’t always have to feel like you have to accomplish some great thing in life in order to make life have value to you. . . . [But] I feel like if there was a way right now that I could repay the program for what they invested in me I would, because that’s how guilty I feel sometimes.

Like the recurring struggle with guilt when situations dictated that they modify their dreams, the Scholars interviewed also reported ongoing conflicts to exercise patience when their timelines to achieve identified goals were delayed. Necessarily, participants reported that circumstances sometimes forced them to allow some of their prior expectations to pass unrealized. Each time one of these once-expected milestones passed without occurring, participants seemed to revisit previous expectations, deconstruct and reconstruct them once more, and refocus. John epitomized this struggle: “[So here and now] I minister to people just in conversation . . . and I pray that at some point I will be accepted by the traditional church so that I can be of service in that role.”

Nate also expressed frustration and questioning as he struggled with patience as well: [I tell churches] about my educational background and what I am interested in and what my passions are and the phone never rings. . . . I can’t tell you how many times I contacted the Colson Prison Fellowship and asked if I could be of any help. It’s kind of a funny thing because our opinion doesn’t really seem to have any value as to how to do correctional ministry. . . . It’s kind of like going to war. Pencil pushers in Washington do all the war game stuff but they don't actually step foot on the battle field. So it’s kind of
like the same thing. . . . You’ve been there. You’ve got the experiences, but they’ve got their own ideas and their opinions of how to do correctional ministry, and what’s effective.

**Participant concludes that investment in one is worthy.** Fittingly, several of the comments made in this section have been about value, worth, success, or purpose. Ultimately, in the final stage, the quality paradigm has almost wholly replaced the quantity paradigm. Across Colson Scholar participants, a similar conclusion surfaced: *significant investment in the life of one other individual is a worthy use of a Wheaton College education and the Colson Scholarship funding*. Nate explained:

> [Although] I do struggle with the whole, “What am I doing?” I think that’s misguided, to have those feelings, that what I’m doing is not an efficient use of my education. . . . My wife always reminds me that just being able to affect the life of one person in one way is the most important thing. She has a little thing on the refrigerator that says, “You may be only one person in this world, but to one person you may be the world.”

Alpha believed that his primary “ministry of one” was to his wife “and then what flows out of that. . . . Having the ability to change and impact [our son’s] life as a result of what God did in my life through Wheaton, makes that all worthwhile.” From his vantage point, being able to give his son an upbringing foreign from the dysfunction of his own childhood was worth all the struggle of the degree completion as well as the investment of the scholarship’s endower.

For John, this investment in another took the form of church ministry:

I spoke at one church. . . . It made an impact that I never even thought would occur—you never know how your ministry, small or great, can impact even one person, and save that person’s intellectual faith. . . . Even if it’s the 5% of the people that can use what I have to offer, that still gives me a purpose in life in terms of ministry. . . . I know that in Christ, all
of us have a small part that we play, and all of us are important, so Wheaton has helped to
shape me in that way.

Jonah believed the educational investment he made in others required him to lead by
example in prioritizing education. He felt that this was a fitting way in which to pass on the
investment that the scholarship’s benefactors made in him:

I believe I have an understanding of [God] because someone else helped me get it, and so
in some way whether I do this job specifically or not, I think I’ll die trying to help other
people get a better understanding of what they need to know. Sometimes that’s going to
be Jesus; sometimes it might not be—but I want to get them at least one step closer to
what will be, in my opinion, ultimate truth. . . . Maybe I will go out one day and minister
to a homeless guy and he’ll remove himself from the streets, and become a disciple and
then go disciple. Maybe that’ll happen. It’s far-fetched, but it’s like, when people have
purpose, I just think their response is different, and you need educated people to actually
give it to them—the blind can't lead the blind. So you need somebody to say, “Here’s how
we need to study. Here’s the reason why we study. And here are possible outcomes after
we study.” And I think that really gives people something to think about; they’re excited
about the next day.

The true value of the Colson Scholarship is measured through statements like this one.
These recollections are representative of participants’ countless hours of personal reflection and
ministry to individuals, families, churches, students, and other groups, yet all in less-than-Colson-
size proportions. It is evident that the sacrifice of the original benefactors of the Colson
Scholarship program, as well as those at Wheaton College who continue to serve them, has not
been in vain. The Colson Scholarship has deeply affected the participants’ lives and continues to
live on in those they serve as they remind themselves, despite ongoing struggles with guilt and patience, that investing in the life of just one person is a worthy use of the education they received through the Colson Scholarship program. The investment that the Colson Scholarship benefactors made appears to be reaping dividends one individual at a time—and compounding interest.

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study correspond to the five areas of inquiry delineated in the introduction of this study: assets and liabilities, coping strategies, disclosure, outcomes, and supports.

**Assets and liabilities.** When recalling their strengths, or assets, Colson Scholar participants felt that their faith, their familial or home community support systems, their age, their preparation for college-level coursework through transfer credit, and their dedication to the accomplishment of degree completion bolstered their pursuit of the degree and helped them to persevere.

However, participants also noted a variety of liabilities comprising a much longer list. Participants delineated underdeveloped academic study, reading, note-taking, and/or writing skills adding to their academic stress. A new environment of unfamiliar jargon, unaccustomed freedom, and unavoidable classroom discussion heightened anxieties. Entering Wheaton with families and experiencing difficulties building relationships with other students served to limit initial campus interactions or activities, as age dynamics contributed to sleep deprivation and financial challenges typically persisted despite the scholarship contribution.

**Coping strategies.** In order to cope with such challenges, participants relied on their personal assets of faith and dedication as well as their academic assets of available professors and tutors. In the toughest times, they found resources within themselves and within their
relationships with God through Christ, especially through prayer, but sometimes through Bible-
reading and contemplative meditation on Bible passages or theological concepts they were 
studying. The Colson Scholars interviewed reported that coping became easier as they reminded 
themselves that they were at Wheaton for others (i.e., their families, other prisoners, future Colson 
Scholars, the original benefactors, other Christians, etc.) and that they were not pursuing the 
education primarily for themselves.

**Factors supporting and inhibiting disclosure.** When opportunities for conversations 
about their criminal pasts did occur, decisions to disclose were proceeded by thoughts of the 
spiritual factors involved, such as how the story was not their own, how it was a gospel message 
of the change Jesus Christ can bring, and how they felt a freedom to explain that when questioned 
or met with curiosity from others about their stories. The participants reported considering their 
representation of other offenders, and the ability of their story to provide hope to individuals or 
families of offenders, when choosing to disclose. Finally, the participants contemplated how 
interactions of disclosure might affect their identities; having a choice in the disclosure process 
seemed to free the participants to both attempt to make a significant difference in the lives of 
others by attempting to give hope to those who might be affected by their stories and to embrace 
redefinitions of themselves.

Factors making disclosure of participants’ criminal pasts less likely included the 
maintenance of their image (i.e., a lack of desire to reveal their “double agent” or “dual identity” 
status) and pre-disclosure emotions of embarrassment, shame, and abnormality. Finally, post-
disclosure expectations, such as fear they would anger someone, fear of being rejected, and fear 
they might fulfill racial stereotypes they perceived others to have, placed limits around their 
choices to disclose.
Outcomes. All participants reported highly positive outcomes; all participants agreed that Wheaton met all of their incoming expectations, even if there were areas in which the Scholarship program might be improved. The interviewees believed their higher education experiences at Wheaton resulted in faith and worldview development, identity development, relational and emotional development, general content knowledge development, and professional and ministerial development. These experiences fostered respect from others, and that earned respect resulted in increased marketability and salary, accessed professional employment, enhanced leadership, and heightened ministerial effectiveness. The final two outcomes Scholars realized were exposure to Christian faith community and graduation.

Support and lack of support. Finally, Scholars interviewed noted a significant number of supports during their time at Wheaton. Reflecting on their entry into Wheaton, the Scholars interviewed spoke of the contributions of the Colson Scholarship’s program coordinator, faith-based mentors and support staff, and the funding the Colson Scholarship provided to demonstrate their academic ability. As the participants continued through Wheaton, they cited significant professor investment, the welcoming nature of the Wheaton staff, the encouragement of the Institute for Prison Ministries’ personnel through their Colson Scholarship program funding decisions, and other students’ encouragement as positive contributing factors. Moving out of higher education, participants continued meaningful relationships with faculty members as they exited the “Wheaton bubble” and entered the “real” world once again.

Participants noted that Wheaton College and/or the Colson Scholarship could have been more supportive by providing career and academic advising or more targeted study skills help. The Scholars interviewed expressed needing better support in terms of increased scheduling flexibility, increased prioritization of learning, and less supervision. Finally, Wheaton could have
striven to encourage expectations that were perhaps more realistic, or attempted to alleviate as much undue pressure to achieve unrealistic expectations as possible, in order to best support Scholars as they attempted to launch into the “real world” to pursue their high expectations.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

I undertook this study in an attempt to address gaps in the extant higher education, correctional education, and prisoner reentry literatures regarding the college-going experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. In order to address these existing gaps, I chose to investigate the higher education experiences of ex-felons at Wheaton College—home to the unique Colson Scholarship program that fully funds the college tuition and housing of qualified ex-felons who receive the award. Before embarking upon a review and discussion of the findings from this study, a reiteration of the research questions those findings begin to answer, as well as a brief review of the methodology employed, is in order.

Research Questions and Methodology

In this study I sought to answer several research questions regarding what it is like to be a Colson Scholar at Wheaton College. These included

RQ1: What do Colson Scholars say are the personal assets and liabilities that affected their post-secondary experiences?

RQ2: What coping strategies do Colson Scholars say they employed during their transitions into, through, and out of their higher education experiences?

RQ3: What factors do Colson Scholars report influenced their decisions to either disclose or not disclose their ex-offender status, and what were their experiences when they chose to disclose?

RQ4: What do Colson Scholars report are the outcomes of their overall higher education experiences?
RQ5: In what ways do Colson Scholars believe that Wheaton College supported them, or could have been of more support to them, during their transitions into, through, and out of higher education?

I formulated these five research questions specifically using Schlossberg’s (1984) Transition Theory as my theoretical framework. This theory, most commonly found in adult counseling literature, provides a specific model through which inquirers can gain a greater understanding into the experiences of adults in various life transitions (e.g., divorce, retirement, etc.). Schlossberg’s (1984) emphases on self, situation, supports, and strategies drove the design of the interview questions and data analysis and provided broad categories around which to organize the results. In addition, Schlossberg’s (1984) moving in, moving through, and moving out continuum provided a chronological facet to the participants’ experiences as they occurred throughout the various stages of transition.

Restatement of the Findings

I found answering those research questions to be a bit more difficult than I had anticipated, especially because only intermittently did all six Colson Scholar participants say something was true across all of their experiences. In retrospect, despite the small sample size, that is not too surprising since the participants’ experiences stretched across three racial categories, four decades at Wheaton, and several modifications to the program. The best way to consider the essence of the phenomenon, then, was to review and discuss the findings along those lines that were true in the experiences of most Scholar participants.

The Scholars I interviewed noted faith, family and community support systems, age, dedication, and preparation for college-level coursework through transfer credit as assets they had upon entering Wheaton. They recalled struggling with liabilities of underdeveloped academic
skills, an environment that exacerbated anxiety, consequences of histories of familial dysfunction and abuse, age dynamics, family stresses, and financial instability or indebtedness as simultaneous stressors. When met with such stresses they coped by reaching within for greater self-efficacy, reaching out for academic help, and reaching up for spiritual help, all the while reminding themselves that they were completing their educations in order to serve others.

When opportunities to disclose their pasts appeared, spiritual factors dominated their reasons for sharing. Participants sought to give hope to others, represent ex-offenders well, and reveal their new identity as changed and worthy of investment. When they chose to withhold information about their criminal pasts, participants’ concerns were most often image maintenance, the avoidance of negative emotions they assumed disclosure would bring, and their expectations of what post-disclosure interactions might entail.

Highly positive about their overall higher education experiences, participants named developmental outcomes related to faith and worldview, identity, relationships and emotions, content knowledge, and profession and ministry. They felt their higher education experiences created respect for them in the eyes of others, resulting in increased marketability or salary, stronger professional credentials, enhanced leadership profiles, and enhanced ministry effectiveness. Finally, the Scholars interviewed named exposure to Christian faith communities and graduation as additional outcomes.

Moving into Wheaton, participants felt a great deal of support from the program coordinator, faith-based mentors, and the Institute for Prison Ministries’ Colson Scholarship program personnel. While at Wheaton, participants cited continuing support including significant faculty investment, staff warmth and availability, Colson Scholarship personnel’s program
support and funding extensions, and other students’ encouragement as positive factors. After graduation, participants continued meaningfully supportive relationships with faculty members.

However, the participants recalled that Wheaton could have been more supportive by providing better career and academic advice and more targeted study skills help. Scheduling flexibility, a greater prioritization for learning over Colson Scholarship representation, and scaling back what participants perceived as over-supervision are ways in which Wheaton could have been more supportive by relaxing control over this post-incarceration population and they moved through their Wheaton College experiences. Finally, moving out, participants felt that Colson Scholarship personnel could have encouraged expectations for post-graduation accomplishment that were more achievable, or perhaps at least alleviated the heavy pressure they felt to somehow repay the scholarship through grandiose post-graduation ministries.

These findings can perhaps play a role in broadening the Colson Scholarship program, which should in turn bring more students, perhaps across multiple institutions and types of institutions. It may be possible at that point to build quantitative analyses on some of the qualitative themes derived from this study. To enhance readers’ understanding of the significance of the qualitative research findings from this study, I discuss them in detail and offer suggestions to address them in the implications for research and practice I introduce throughout this chapter.

The Essence of the Colson Scholar Experience

The essence of a phenomenon is the sum of its core meanings mutually understood through the lived experiences of those individuals who have experienced the particular phenomenon or event (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is the very nature of the phenomenon; it is what makes the phenomenon what it is (van Manen, 1990). Although according to Moustakas (1994) “the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted” (p. 100), I collected
information regarding the common experiences of the participants of the phenomenon that contributed to the core essence of the transition for those who have lived it. The culmination of a phenomenological inquiry exists in the presentation of the essence (Creswell, 2013). van Manen (1990) considered the phenomenological study to be a success when the structural lived experiences of the phenomenon were so well described that “we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way” (p. 39).

Although an individual Colson Scholar may have different experiences, participants shared transitional features that made up the essence of the phenomenon of being an ex-felon on a college campus. Although this group consisted of six Colson Scholarship recipients at a Christian liberal arts college, their commonly shared experiences clarify for readers the essence of the phenomenon of what it is like to be an Christian ex-felon transitioning into, through, and out of higher education. In each of the three phases, occasionally themes arose that, because they were not universally experienced, can not be seen as essential to the phenomenon itself. However, because some seemed significant, I will briefly address them below, following my description of universal aspects.

**Moving in.** Colson Scholars moving into Wheaton College experienced mixed emotions about beginning their higher education journeys. On the one hand, they came in with high expectations of what they would learn and be exposed to, what Wheaton would prepare them to do when they were done with their educations, and what they would accomplish afterwards. They came in convinced they would succeed, reminding themselves of their assets of faith, family and community support systems, age, prior college credits earned and their own dedication.

This group was not merely dreamers, however. They knew that earning their educations would not be easy given their liabilities. After all, their upbringings in environments where, for
most, education was deprioritized but abuse was prevalent led them to similarly devalue education as youths. As juveniles they found themselves entering the justice system for relatively minor offenses and eventually involved themselves in the sale or use of controlled substances and other types of criminal offending. Later, as newly-minted Colson Scholars arriving at their first classes, they began to question their educational abilities as they realized their educational skills were severely underdeveloped for the level of academic rigor at Wheaton. The college environment exacerbated the insecurity they felt due to their academic deficiencies, and they began to question not only their abilities but also that initial rejection of educational pursuits in their lives.

Those who arrived at Wheaton College with families wondered how they were going to be able to manage school and home responsibilities, and age and financial strains complicated these liabilities. Although the program coordinator of the Colson Scholarship, their faith-based mentors, and the Colson Scholarship personnel provided significant means of support moving in, participants reported that career and academic advising and increased study skills help would have increased the initial support they felt. In this phase, themes that were important to individual Colson Scholars interviewed, but not part of the essential nature of the phenomenon, included areas of which incidentals students had to pay for and which were funded, lack of familiarity with college jargon, lack of structure and the distraction of freedom, language barriers for a student for whom English is a second language, and the necessity of more information regarding placement testing and insurance.

This undeterred group began to realize that they must rely on their assets and strengthen their weaknesses by developing coping mechanisms to overcome them. The early realization of the need for coping mechanisms seems to be where this first “moving in” phase ends. I would phrase this first stage of the transition as “High Expectations,” because these high expectations
did not appear simply as they began to exit the institution but they were persistent from before these Colson Scholar participants visited the campus. When they entered the college, their high expectations related specifically to their expectations of their years at Wheaton. In the moving through and moving out phases, however, and especially the final phase, they increasingly connected these high expectations to what their education would help them accomplish upon graduation.

**Moving through.** As Colson Scholar participants began to experience what Wheaton was really like, they began to realize how different their expectations of the college experience were in comparison to the realities of their lived experiences. They began to realize that their liabilities made their educational pursuits within the academically demanding context of Wheaton College even more challenging than they had optimistically expected they would be. Thus, the “moving through” phase seemed to begin with participants developing coping mechanisms out of rank necessity and seeking to implement them to succeed academically. For survival they reached out to their faculty members and fellow peer-tutors for academic help, reached up to God for spiritual help through prayer, reached within for self-sufficiency and self-efficacy, all the while considering that the purpose of their educational pursuits were primarily for the service of others. These modes of coping served them well and helped them persist at Wheaton.

As they encountered others who did not know about their personal narratives, they had opportunities to disclose their criminal pasts. Sometimes they chose to do so in order to highlight their spiritual transformation, sometimes to represent the group of Colson Scholars or ex-felons well, sometimes to reveal their redefined selves, and sometimes to make a difference by giving hope. They did not always choose to disclose, however, and sometimes allowed pride in maintaining their unsullied images before others; pre-disclosure emotions of embarrassment,
shame, and abnormality; or post-disclosure fears of angering others, rejection, or fulfilling racial stereotypes to keep them from disclosing their pasts.

In this moving through stage, Colson Scholars named a greater number of supports than in either of the other two stages of the transition. Wheaton professors, Wheaton staff members, Institute for Prison Ministries’ Colson Scholarship personnel, and other students were meaningful sources of support. Wheaton College may have been able to ease transition pressures by increasing students’ scheduling flexibility, prioritizing their learning in lieu of showcasing them, and relaxing the level of supervision the college seemed to concentrate on them. However, faculty members helped students persist through the transition. However, the chasm between participants’ expectations and reality was still quite wide. Although this stage began with the acknowledgement of the differences between the participants’ expectations of the program and reality, it ended with the beginning of the transition out of Wheaton, graduation season. Important but non-essential themes raised in this phase consisted of involvement in High Road and study abroad programs, multiple moves while at Wheaton, the idea of what is possible being redefined, the redemption of time, and negative race relations (beyond their influence on relationship-building and influencing disclosure).

Moving out. The Scholar participants had high expectations for what they would accomplish upon their graduations, and graduation itself was a moving experience because they were able to take pride in their achievements and as a result, redefine for themselves and their families the legacy they would leave. Immediately upon graduation, they planned to attach themselves to a ministry or secular place of employment where they could succeed in making a significant difference. After all, they had experienced significant gains in faith and worldview development, identity development, relational and emotional development, general content
knowledge development, professional and ministerial development, and connection to a Christian faith community, all outcomes that increasingly motivated them with a growing desire to “give back.”

However, upon entering the workforce, they found the world to be a little less enthusiastic about them than they were about it. Current employment and ministerial structures and hiring practices were not friendly to formerly incarcerated persons and sometimes the participants found that their degrees were simply not enough to convince people of their individual worth. They began to question how practical their initial high expectations were and over time to deconstruct and reconstruct those expectations. Since initially they were so committed to the expectations they had, and since their Wheaton College experiences contributed to those high expectations, the Scholars exhibited struggles with guilt and patience because their reconstructed expectations were incongruent with their initial timelines, or at least what they perceived their timelines should be.

Participants reported that eventually they recognized gains of increased marketability and salary, accessed professional employment, enhanced leadership profiles, and heightened ministry effectiveness as additional outcomes of their Wheaton College education. However, the Scholars interviewed often couched those gains in terms of the difference between their initial expectations and their present realities. Eventually, they came to justify their current activities by explaining that investing in just one individual truly was a worthy use of their education only to, in mid-sentence sometimes, revert to their struggles with guilt and patience over having reconstructed their expectations. As significant and continuing supports, faculty maintained contact with the Scholars, although participants reported that Wheaton College personnel overall could have been more supportive by encouraging expectations that were more realistic and helping to alleviate the tremendous pressure they felt to achieve feats like those that Chuck Colson had achieved. As a
result, the moving out phase still seemed very much open-ended for these Scholars. In this final phase, themes non-essential but important included concepts surrounding recidivism, family as a support (not merely an asset and liability as previously mentioned), greater perception of pressure on single Colson Scholars than married Scholars, and awareness of the role other Colson Scholars played in the lives of the Colson Scholars interviewed.

I embarked on this journey to begin to learn what it is like to be an ex-felon on a higher education campus—more specifically, a Colson Scholar. My desire was to learn what assets and liabilities simultaneously support and challenge him; what coping mechanisms he employs to succeed into, through, and out of his higher education transition; what factors go into his choices to disclose or not disclose his criminal past; what ways there were in which the institution and program were most supportive or could have been more supportive to him; and finally what outcomes he observed, or continues to observe, in his life following his higher education transition.

Having interviewed the Colson Scholars and striven to understand their common experience while bracketing my own, the central issue as apparent to me has always been about time. Their adolescence seemed to be about squandering time, their young adulthood about doing time, and their mid-life—as Colson Scholars—about redeeming the time. They have realized they cannot make up for lost time, but they also came to realize that the central gift of the scholarship was not just one of money, but what that money represented—time. For the participants, the Colson Scholarship represented time to study without having to work full-time and attend part-time, thereby missing more time with their families. It also allowed more time for ministry, or to build relationships and make emotional connections. They learned that if they invested that gift of time well, they might be able to leverage their experiences for future employment or ministry.
There is more than one sense in which this scholarship seemed to do for the participants what they could not do for themselves. In prison, they had wished the hands on the clock to move faster; at Wheaton, the participants seem to have wanted them to slow down. It is all a matter of perspective, I suppose. Their wisdom of perspective was perhaps most evident in the fact that they were striving to redeem the time, to buy it back, and to end the cycle of despair for their families by investing that time well. They concluded that the best investment of their time was in their children in an attempt to break the cycle of poor decision-making and to model before their children a high value of education and a high esteem of God, believing it was God who had guided them to the Colson Scholarship from the start.

One participant actually used the biblical phrase “redeeming the time” and another talked about getting “back the years that were stolen.” In some small way, the scholarship seems to have done the impossible—turn back the clock as if the Colson Scholarship were a time machine. Somehow it transported these participants back to a place where the spark of their youths returned and caused them both to dream big and to believe that they could achieve those dreams. They are achieving them, and they have achieved them, one day at a time and one individual at a time, regardless of prior expectations.

Connections to the Literature

The findings of this study generally are congruent with the literature reviewed in Chapter II. This not only supports the credibility of these findings, but also adds strength to some entering assumptions made in light of the absence of ex-felon student populations in the literature. In other words, in the dearth of literature specifically addressing this underserved population in higher education, I reviewed literature addressing adult students, non-traditional students, and currently incarcerated post-secondary correctional education students in order to extend and apply this body
of literature to ex-offenders in higher education. In this section I tie findings from this study to the literature in order to confirm, question, or expand the extant literature; where gaps remain these are noted. Specifically addressed here are similarities in student liabilities, evidence of institutionalization, phenomena surrounding stigma, disclosure and race, observations regarding outcomes of higher education, roles of faculty involvement, and finally, observations regarding recidivism.

**Similarities in liabilities.** Although the delimitations in the methodological design of this study were such that I only interviewed six participants, this population still reflected what researchers know to be true of correctional populations in general. They were non-traditional, low-income, mostly first-generation students, primarily from historically underrepresented populations in higher education, who were largely academically underprepared for college-level coursework (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Falk & Blaylock, 2010; Harlow, 2003). Only about half of US correctional populations have a high school diploma or a GED (Brazzell et al., 2009; Harlow, 2003), and of those who do hold a GED, the majority (70%) have earned these achievements in state and federal prisons (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008). The majority of the Colson Scholars who participated in this study were similarly educated when released from prison (although all either already had or would go on to earn college credit for transfer).

As a result, many of the liabilities and challenges noted of those inmates who attempted post-secondary correctional education (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Sanford & Foster, 2012) plagued these Colson Scholar participants as well, such as a lack of the basic skills necessary to pursue higher education, past histories of substance abuse or dependency, and a lack of financial resources (outside of the Colson Scholarship provision). Just as prisoners consistently underperform their peers in the general population in writing, communication,
literacy, and other language skills, they also underperform them in math and quantitative literacy skills (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007; Harlow, 2003). The participants also noted many of these same areas of deficiency and wished to see them incorporated into targeted remedial courses or extended orientation sessions for Colson Scholars.

**Evidences of institutionalization.** In addition to those challenges, participants acknowledged carrying an often uncomfortable “ex-offender banner” and “dual identity”—providing support for LeBel's (2012) “invisible stripes” theory. However, the participants did not hint that the level of adjustment required to cope with social stigma on campus was particularly psychologically stressful, raising questions as to whether or not they had a relatively low level of residual institutionalization post-release (Goffman, 1961; Haney, 2003).

Over the duration of the interviews, however, participants recalled transitional experiences that clearly revealed residue of institutionalization as delineated by Haney’s (2003) seven marks of institutionalization. For example, although all of the other participants were either neutral or somewhat resentful of the high level of supervision they felt that Wheaton maintained on them, Kenneth lamented that Wheaton lacked the structure that prison had provided him, as well as the “distraction of freedom” that accompanied his entrance to Wheaton College, aligning with Haney’s (2003) first aspect of prison institutionalization: “dependence on institutional structure and contingencies” (p. 7). Second, Haney (2003) also described “hyper-vigilance, interpersonal distrust, and suspicion” as characteristic of institutionalization; these are evidenced by John’s description of feeling that a “watchful eye” was always upon him and having to act accordingly.

Nate’s questioning of his self-worth and manipulation echoed Haney’s (2003) observation of “emotional over-control, alienation, and psychological distancing”; “social withdrawal and isolation”; “incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture”; “interpersonal distrust and
suspicion”; and “diminished sense of self-worth and personal value” (pp. 82-83). Shaun described “post-traumatic stress reactions,” Haney’s (2003) final aspect of institutionalization, although these appeared to be less due “to the pains of imprisonment” (p. 83), as to the childhood abuse that Shaun believed led to his self-medication through drugs and alcohol, and to his subsequent imprisonment.

**Stigma and disclosure.** Scant research exists relative to the experiences and interactions of ex-offenders on a college campus and how disclosure of their pasts occurs in those spaces. One critical article that addressed the experiences of ex-felons on college campuses was Copenhaver et al. (2007), who looked at four ex-felon students at Ball State University who began their college education while in prison and then continued their education on-campus post-release. Despite the obvious difference in institutional types, this study is worthy of comparison due to the similarity in population, methodological design, and focus on post-release college experiences. The findings of the two studies mirror one another, adding a level of credibility to my study as well as confirming the extant literature.

Like Copenhaver et al. (2007), I found that ex-felon students sometime chose not to disclose their pasts due to feelings of shame and anxiety as well as expectations of others’ negative reactions. Copenhaver et al.’s (2007) participants also reported difficulty with the college transition as evident in my participants’ reported liabilities, and both groups similarly expressed needs to hide their pasts. A significant difference between Copenhaver et al.’s (2007) observations and my research observations is that although my participants did not seem less aware of the stigma, they did seem perhaps less affected by it. In other words, there seemed to be a capacity within the participants in this study to compartmentalize those feelings.
In fact, I detected a much greater but more subtle struggle among participants affected by racial stigmatization than offender stigmatization. Whether offender stigma is less existent on Christian college campuses due to emphases on redemption in their faith as Jonah and Alpha suggested, or whether racial stigma is actually more present on a more structurally-monolithic Christian liberal arts college campus of 3000+ than a state-assisted public research university campus of 20,000+, are additional themes worthy of investigation and future research. A caveat is that the racial stigma my participants reported came largely from decades-old experiences; the Wheaton College of their day may not be the Wheaton College of today, although feelings of stigmatization can create significant barriers to community building in any era. This discussion will be revisited in the next subsection connecting the findings to the literature.

The only other substantial inquiry into the disclosure of ex-offenders on college campuses relates to special admissions processes that result from having a criminal history at the point of application. Like the participants in this study, specially-admitted ex-felon undergraduates who applied to a public, four-year university in the Midwest wrote about regretting their criminal pasts and about higher education as an opportunity for themselves, their families, and society (Custer, 2012). Custer (2012) noted that a few expressed religious reasons for pursuing higher education and attributed rehabilitation success to their faith, mirroring sentiments expressed by the Colson Scholar population interviewed.

**Race privilege.** Following the written completion of my findings section, I came across a similar study that had been published just after I began my data collection, and lends a measure of credibility, dependability, and confirmability to my research. Livingston and Miller (2014) conducted hour-long interviews with their participants, a group of 34 students in a large state university’s post-incarceration higher education program. The researchers wanted to “examine
how pre- and post-carceral financial, familial, community, and social network contexts shape postsecondary educational experiences after incarceration” (Livingston & Miller, 2014, p. 213). Although the questions they asked varied quite a bit from the protocols I utilized, the similarity in the findings between the two studies is remarkable.

First, Livingston and Miller (2014) found that for the students they interviewed, age differences between themselves and other students created significant challenges to in assimilating to campus life, quite similar to my findings that both age and racial differences created barriers to relationship-building and disclosure. Although their participants’ emphasis on the effects of post-incarceration institutionalization, or prisonization, was greater than what was relevant for my participants, their participants had also generally been out of correctional institutions for shorter periods of time, were younger, and two-thirds were still under the oversight of either parole or intensive supervision probation at the time of interview (Livingston & Miller, 2014).

The researchers also expressed the need for tangible supports along the lines of economic resources and freedom to keep time commitments (Livingston & Miller, 2014). Similar to my findings that family can also be a liability, Livingston and Miller (2014) suggested that “students with families and children of their own, particularly those with fewer economic resources, are apt to face greater familial obligations, including financial responsibilities, that hinder opportunities for full engagement in university life” (p. 230).

The researchers also found that race-privileged and class-privileged participants described their experiences in the higher education environment in “unequivocally positive terms, and this stemmed largely from their reimmersion back into a setting characterized by middle-class, suburban culture, as well as their ability, described previously, to internalize and articulate
identities as nonoffenders who had made a youthful mistake” (Livingston & Miller, 2014, p. 230). Black, Latino, and biracial participants, however, were more likely to report having to “learn how to transform their identities to align with campus culture before they could genuinely connect with students and faculty who didn’t share their past experiences” leaving them feeling uncomfortable, like outsiders, and negatively affecting their engagement level (Livingston & Miller, 2014, p. 230).

**Outcomes of higher education.** Researchers have given ample attention to challenges regarding employment attainment for ex-felons as evidenced in Chapter II. Likewise, participants in this study—although not focused specifically on employment, except as an aspect of transition out of higher education—faced similar barriers to employment. Legal issues with background checks, limited skill development and appropriate training, stigma attached to their criminal histories, and the high unemployment in the country all surfaced to confirm the literature regarding barriers to employment for ex-offender populations (Brown, 2011; Freisthler & Godsey, 2004; Owens, 2009). Although the participants in this study used different language, they acknowledged both their loss of social capital (Rose & Clear, 2001) and the impact that college attendance and post-release employment could make to mitigate that loss (Ubah, 2004).

Just as Owens (2009) had theorized, the Colson Scholars interviewed said the Wheaton College experience helped them to address stigma related to their criminal records as well as time lost to incarceration while connecting them to quality employment opportunities. Some participants interviewed reported little or no trouble attaining or maintaining quality employment, especially in light of the opportunity that their college education and experiences gave them to successfully leverage conversations about their criminal histories (Owens, 2009). Higher education may “offer one of the few meaningful ways for former inmates to make real inroads
into ‘good’ jobs in the primary labor market, available to those with academic credentials, and the human and social capital that come with these” (Livingston & Miller, 2014, p. 216).

MacKenzie (2008) reported that correctional programs targeting cognitive behavioral change and individual-level change were most effective in comparison to other types of programs, and she proposed that although a liberal arts curriculum might not provide specific job skills, it may excel in preparing formerly incarcerated persons for employment indirectly. Explaining her view, MacKenzie (2008) posited that although education can be quite important and effective in helping ex-offenders gain employment because of known cognitive skills outcomes of higher education, employment gains are really an indirect effect of the education:

[Educational programs] may be effective because they focus on changing the thinking skills of the students. This in turn, may increase an exoffender’s ability to find and keep employment. The individual becomes more educated, this makes employment more likely, which in turn permits the person to form a tie or bond to the wor[Id] of work…. [However] programs would be expected to be most effective if they focus on individual transformations . . . [these] programs are important in bringing about a change in thinking and cognitions and not in their ability to directly impact the offender’s ability to get employment. (p. 13).

MacKenzie (2008) cited Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph who called this change “cognitive transformation.” MacKenzie (2008) underscored that this type of individual transformation is critical to move “toward a different way of life. Only if a transformation occurs is the person able to sustain a new life. Thus, educational programs that bring about a cognitive transformation would be expected to be effective in changing offenders” (pp. 12-13). This change
then expands to the social context, enabling a bond that can result in a growth of respect for the individual in the eyes of others, as MacKenzie (2008) explained:

This [individual] change is required before the person will be able to take advantage of opportunities in the environment….individual-level change must precede changes in ties or bonds to social institutions. The social environment may be conducive to the formation of ties, but the individual must change if the bond is to form. To get along with family, keep a job, support children, or form strong, positive ties with other institutions, the person must change in cognitive reasoning, attitude toward drug use, antisocial attitudes, reading level, or vocation skills. (p. 13)

The importance of MacKenzie’s (2008) research to this population in particular is both the emphasis she placed on cognitive skills development over specific job skills (increasingly critical in a globalized economy and within a technologically-adept society where citizens often migrate from job to job) as well as the emphasis she placed on individual-level transformation. The findings included examples of how my participants believed that Wheaton College expanded their general content knowledge and opened their minds to new ways of thinking. Although participants attributed as much of this prosocial change to faith transformation as cognitive transformation, participants also tightly related the two and saw them as genuinely connected.

Similarly to MacKenzie’s (2008) observations, the Colson Scholars interviewed also revealed how important transformative shifts in thinking, attitudes toward substance abuse, development of prosocial desires to emotionally connect with others without manipulation, and improvement in educational skills were in translating positive outcomes into their lives. The changes, in turn, have resulted in the outcomes mentioned throughout this section and those that are continued below. (For a more extended explanation of this well-balanced theoretical rationale
between education, employment, and recidivism than is fit for the scope of this study, see MacKenzie, 2008).

In terms of financial and non-monetary benefits, this study confirmed the extant literature for non-correctional and correctional populations alike. The findings of this study upheld previous reports from Baum et al. (2013) that higher levels of education correlate with higher wages. The Colson Scholar participants described increased salary, and in one case, justification for wages earned at rates that had been higher than commensurate with his educational level prior to entering Wheaton. Not only do college graduates enjoy higher wages, they also enjoy greater opportunities for themselves and their families overall (Baum et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

My findings certainly underscored Erisman and Contardo’s (2005) assertion that higher education for ex-carcereated populations allowed them to access “many economic and social benefits associated with higher education. . . . offer[ing] a chance to break the cycle of inequality” for these students’ future generations (Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. v). Several participants directly noted how their children enjoyed or would enjoy a childhood positively distinct from their own specifically as a result of their college experiences at Wheaton. These benefits represent the “compounding interest” of higher education in that “students whose parents went to college are significantly more likely to go to college themselves” (Baum et al., 2013, p. 2). Participants named the provision of a legacy for their children and setting college attendance as an expectation as significant motivations for their own college pursuits.

The extant research is clear that higher education has the ability to beget greater good for society; the findings of this study certainly confirmed that literature. Specifically, Baum et al. (2013) noted that adults with “higher levels of education are less likely to depend on social safety-
net programs, generating decreased demand on public budgets” (p. 2). All six participants reported they did not receive governmental assistance of any kind at the time of the interview.

In addition to the financial benefit to society, college education also exposes students to new ideas typically resulting in a greater appreciation for diverse opinions or at least a greater openness to the opinions of others (Baum et al., 2013). The participants identified this expected exposure as one of the reasons they initially pursued higher education at Wheaton, and they reported that their Wheaton College experiences did not fail to deliver by exposing them to new ways of thinking and new cultural experiences.

**Role of faculty involvement.** Participants’ experiences at Wheaton confirm Hirt’s (2006) findings that faculty members at religiously affiliated institutions are welcoming, promote students’ spiritual development, and prioritize the integration of faith and learning. The Scholars interviewed generally noted high levels of involvement with faculty members as supports moving through and out of the higher education transition. Participants felt cared for when faculty welcomed them into their homes and families, mentored and affirmed them, and integrated faith and learning into their classrooms. Participants specifically confirmed faculty’s contribution in helping them answer their “big questions,” as Parks (2000) identified as critical to the faith development of young adults—although John’s negative experience was a distinct exception.

Wheaton faculty generally made a real and consistent difference in the faith development of the Colson Scholars interviewed. Benne (2001) argued that faith-based institutions might be best poised to encourage such faith development because they often are oriented around specifically-targeted faith-based outcomes. If this type of scholarship existed at various campuses, more opportunity to confirm or disconfirm such assertions would also exist. Nevertheless, Benne (2001) contended that faith-based institutions develop distinct campus
environmental and social climates, although at Wheaton some participants regrettably found the racial environment quite cold, as noted in the sections on relationship-building difficulties and factors influencing non-disclosure. Finally, Benne (2001) asserted that faith-based institutions provided a high level of integration of faith and learning designed to impart a coherent, faith-oriented worldview since faith is their operating paradigm (Benne, 2001). Wheaton’s emphasis on the integration of faith and learning resulted in the majority of participants naming faith and worldview development as a significant developmental outcome they experienced as a result of their Wheaton College education.

The elephant of recidivism. I would be remiss not to mention what is perhaps the “elephant in the room” in any study of educational outcomes for correctional populations—recidivism. Researchers have consistently found correlations between higher levels of education and reduced rates of recidivism (Batiuk, 1997; Esperian, 2010; Lichtenberger, 2010; Mercer, 2009).

However, this study provides little direct information regarding recidivism. Sure, there were six participants, and yes, one returned to incarcerated status because of crimes committed post-Wheaton, and five did not. Beyond that however, there is little directly tying their overall recidivism success to their higher education experiences. Although Lockwood et al. (2012) found that offenders’ education and employment were the “most important predictors of post-release recidivism” (p. 380), the Colson Scholar participants interviewed attributed little to none of their personal recidivism success to their higher education experiences or employment. Rather, the Scholars interviewed consistently cited personal dispositions and spiritual resources as the determining factors in whether or not they reoffended (although I intentionally spent little time on
this in the findings chapter due to the fact that no research questions directly related to recidivism or criminal history).

The only Scholar to reoffend reported that there was another Colson Scholar with whom he would regularly talk who, over time, became a problematic influence: “He was a little bit more bitter about things. . . . It was awkward, but I didn't have the bitterness that I think he did. . . . He saw things from a different perspective. . . . I don't know if [he] finished or not. . . . I really don't think so.” The participant recollected that not only was the other Colson Scholar embittered, he also played an integral role in subtly encouraging this participant back into criminal activity after graduating from Wheaton with Colson Scholarship-funded bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

However, this finding is not inconsistent with some of the extant literature previously mentioned. For example, Colson Scholar participants’ personal explanations for their recidivism successes are confirmatory of Schirmer’s (2008) observations that post-secondary education for correctional populations carries secondary benefits including indirectly affecting recidivism rates through “increased psychological well-being . . . and a strengthened identity” (p. 30). The redefined self the interviewees described, a self that is genuinely changed and worthy of investment, seems to lend a measure of credibility to Schirmer’s (2008) observation. Just as Torre and Fine (2005) found that their incarcerated participants’ personal transformations and reflections were indirect outcomes of their in-prison higher education experiences learning resilience and purpose, so too did the Colson Scholars interviewed learn similar lessons and experience similar growth as an indirect result of their post-incarceration higher education experiences.

The spiritual reasons Colson Scholar participants gave for their lack of recidivism are similar to Johnson’s (2011) findings in his investigation of the qualitative responses of
participants in studies regarding the relationship between crime and religion. All five of
Johnson’s themes, “I’m not who I used to be” (the theme related to the outcome of identity
development); “spiritual growth” (the theme related to the outcome of spiritual transformation and
faith/worldview development); “God v. Prison Code” (the theme related to trust and vulnerability,
especially spiritual vulnerability, before others and most closely tied to the relational and
emotional development outcome); “Positive Outlook on Life” (the theme related most closely to
the redefined self); and “Need to Give Back to Society” (the theme related to ministry
development) (Johnson, 2011), are present to varying degrees in my participants’ statements
about the spiritual reasons they were successful at avoiding criminal behavior.

Despite findings in this study that support Johnson’s (2011) work, there are no programs
comparable to the Colson Scholarship at secular institutions to utilize in making a recidivism
comparison, nor would such a comparison be appropriate given the methodological design of this
study (Gehring, 2000). In fact, recidivism remains a poor direct measure of the quality of
educational programs in general (Gehring, 2000), and especially of the Colson Scholarship
program in particular. Although the “recidivism rate” among the participants in my study is only
17%, there are several reasons why this study should not necessarily be utilized as proof positive
of the claims that higher education results in lowered recidivism for this population:

• participants self-selected into this study (potentially introducing self-selection bias),
• participants may not represent the population of Colson Scholars,
• individual characteristics known to affect recidivism are not controlled for,
• sample size is small,
• transfer credits’ presence convolutes the inquiry,
• participants attended the program across various decades and interacted with different program directors or had different faith-based mentors in some cases, and
• participants had extremely variant criminal records.

Limitations

Weaknesses or limitations may exist in the research process I have described. These limitations are not to be confused with the previously mentioned delimitations, which are simply choices that I originally made in relation to the project to limit its scope (e.g., my choice to have only one interview site as the scholarship program is unique to Wheaton College). On the contrary, limitations are those occurrences that might impose upon the quality of the study or perhaps even affect my findings (Creswell, 2013). Several potential limitations have the possibility of affecting this study’s quality, including the possibility of a narrow theoretical framework, a lack of sufficient prolonged engagement, the potential for researcher bias, and the potential for a power and privilege dynamic.

Narrow theoretical frameworks. I designed this study to answer specific research questions surrounding aspects of the higher education transitions of ex-felons, and as a result, considered Schlossberg’s (1984) Transition Theory the preferred theoretical framework. However, in hindsight, the theories of Levinson (1978), Fowler (1981), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) may have offered even richer detail in certain areas pertaining to the development of ex-offenders in higher education, and especially the role of environment in that development. First, Levinson’s (1978) Adult Development Theory provides another lens through which to view the ex-felon’s higher education transition. His emphasis on mentoring and on the dreams of men transitioning through seasons of life—especially as he defines the dream as one’s ideal reality similar to the high expectations of the Scholars—might add a layer to our understanding of how
these Scholars’ dreams undergo and underwent change. In addition, Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development Theory could present an additional lens through which one could investigate Colson Scholars’ faith development and spiritual maturation through the greater higher education transition. Finally, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory would allow a researcher to investigate the environment and contexts within which a Colson Scholar finds himself and evaluate the overall higher education transition in light of this framework.

**Lack of sufficient prolonged engagement.** Due to the time constraints of this project, as well as my desire to show the participants an added measure of value and honor in meeting them face-to-face if possible, repeated visits for follow-up interviews were not realistic. There was limited time for observation and prolonged contact due to distance and the impracticality of meeting more than once to conduct interviews (participants were geographically dispersed as far as Florida, Massachusetts, and Illinois). Although my participant member-check of the findings mitigates this issue somewhat, it is worth noting that multiple interviews—such as one to follow-up on additional questions that surfaced—may have enhanced the findings.

**Researcher bias.** Toward the beginning of Chapter III, in the section on researcher positionality, reflexivity, and bracketing/epoché, I addressed the possible biases that must be suspended for me to attempt to understand the experience of being an ex-felon in higher education at Wheaton College. The chief areas of concern related to bracketing my experiences as a higher education administrator, law enforcement practitioner, and Christian in such a way that they did not project themselves onto the experiences of my participants. When certain themes arose that appeared to be peripheral and only reported by one participant, I still typically prepared them in written draft form, preferring to have my advisor delete them rather than delete them myself, providing another check that I was not omitting them simply because of personal bias. In
addition, I consulted a peer reviewer on themes and important emphases within themes to check the codes then categories that eventually supported the findings. I also was similarly careful about issues of faith since these always seemed to be primary with a given findings section. However, I reviewed the transcripts and coding repeatedly and found that faith was primary in the findings because it provided primary significance to the lives of the participants.

The potential for a power and privilege dynamic. A real (although not perceived during the interviews) power and/or privilege differential may have been dormant but present, as I have worked in the criminal justice field for over a decade. This could have affected the research, especially among ex-offenders who may have had any number of negative experiences within the criminal justice system. However, I did not share that fact about myself until the end of the interview, if at all. A similar possible limitation is that those who received the scholarship but recidivated, perhaps, may have been ashamed and as a result, refused to participate. Finally, the real potential exists as well that Colson Scholars who may have had bad experiences at Wheaton refused to participate due to a misinterpretation of the purpose of this study as a pro-Wheaton marketing attempt or some other related misunderstanding (since the invitation did come from the gatekeeper who is actively affiliated with Wheaton College).

Implications for Practice

Despite these potential limitations, the findings from this study lead to several implications for both current and future higher education practice. These suggestions stem from an amalgamation of my observations, the current research, and participant contributions. Broadly these implications for practice include:
not disclosing Colson Scholar status,

developing and mandating Colson-Scholar-specific orientation sessions and study skills courses,

gauging Wheaton campus community members’ attitudes toward prisoners and prisoner reentry,

addressing indebtedness as part of future Colson Scholars’ application processes,

pursuing replication of the Colson Scholarship elsewhere,

bridging the Wheaton campus’ apparent racial diversity gap,

providing flexible scheduling where possible,

involving current Colson Scholars in more prison ministry opportunities while on the campus,

soliciting feedback from past Colson Scholars for the benefit of future Scholars, and

encouraging realistic post-graduation expectations.

Employing just some of these implications for practice could serve to enhance the program or at least allow implications that appear to have the ability to enhance the program to be tested for their relative merit.

**Guard Colson Scholar identity closely.** A significant portion of this dissertation study dealt with disclosure of a Scholar participant’s criminal past along two lines: factors influencing the decision to disclose or not to disclose, and experiences that occurred when Colson Scholar participants chose to disclose their pasts. My recommendation would be to guard the status of an individual Colson Scholar as closely as possible since participants reported acute embarrassment and shame when “outed” as Scholars, being uncomfortable with the feeling that every eye was on
them, and sensing that if faculty knew their status as Colson Scholars, it might affect their grading.

The Institute for Prison Ministries and Colson Scholarship personnel should only share a student’s identity as a Colson Scholar when necessary. When Colson Scholars choose of their own accord to disclose this identity, the party learning the information should keep it confidential and strive not to show differential treatment toward the Scholar. FERPA restrictions apply to all educational institutions that receive funding under any program administered by the U.S. Department of Education; private college and universities “generally do receive such funding and are subject to FERPA” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, para. 2, emphasis added). Through FERPA Colson Scholars, although they have signed incoming waivers to allow Wheaton College, Colson Scholarship, and Institute for Prison Ministries’ personnel to share transcripts, are actually protected from these parties’ unnecessary sharing of Scholars’ educational records without permission, raising the question of whether or not FERPA violations occur when Scholars’ ex-offender status is shared without permission (which, although shared in the educational environment, is a matter of public record).

**Create or strengthen Colson-Scholar specific orientation sessions.** The findings clearly support the need for the development of an extensive series of orientation sessions geared specifically to Colson Scholars. Scholars need more information about incidentals the scholarship covers (e.g., insurance), how to register for classes (e.g., prerequisites, placement testing, etc.), and other entry-specific information. They also would benefit from targeted academic and career advising tools that would help them to better understand what marketable careers are open to them, how their skills could be determined to be a good or perhaps poor fit, what salary ranges can be expected for such positions, and how to pursue such a position with a criminal background.
By conducting low-profile, Colson-Scholar specific orientation sessions, Wheaton College could provide information needed by entering Colson scholars without identifying them as such to the larger campus community.

Since transfer students typically must quickly choose their majors once arriving at Wheaton, intensive academic advising on the front end of Colson Scholars’ stay becomes more critical. Unlike other adult students who often enter the college environment having a better understanding of themselves, what they would like to study, and what they would like to do with their degrees, ex-felon students (based on the findings in this study) would appreciate the additional information that a well-crafted and individualized approach to intensive academic-advising can provide. Arguably first impressions are often lasting impressions, and it is unknown what impact this type of offering might have had on Scholars who attempted degrees at Wheaton and did not complete them; thus, this implication for practice could easily turn into a future implication for research as well.

**Mandate an enhanced study skills course.** Due to the repeatedly noted underdevelopment of study, note-taking, reading, and writing skills appropriate to meet the challenges of Wheaton’s academic rigor, a study skills course would be a welcome supplement to these orientation courses. Rather than optional workshops on time management, participants felt that mandatory courses should address remedial math and English as well as introduce general preliminary research and writing skills. This seems prudent given the academic rigor of the collegiate experience and the underdeveloped skills of those entering higher education from correctional settings (Contardo & Tolbert, 2008; Crayton & Neusteter, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011).
Gauge students’ attitudes toward both the Colson Scholarship and prisoner reentry.

Park (2009) utilized the Attitude Toward Prisoners scale (Melvin, Gramling, & Gardner, 1985) to survey 529 university undergraduates in an attempt to identify factors correlated with college students’ attitudes toward prisoners and prisoner reentry. Examining many variables, Park (2009) found that religion, political party, religious value of forgiveness, and close relationship with prisoners were the significant factors correlated to these attitudes, with “the religious value of forgiveness” representing the most powerful predictor. More specifically, Christian identification (as most Wheaton students identify) (Benne, 2001) was significantly predictive of a lower likelihood of demonstrating support toward prisoners and prisoner reentry, while a higher “religious value of forgiveness” was significantly predictive of greater support toward prisoners and prisoner reentry (Park, 2009). Since these predictions seem to offset one another, more research is needed to discover the support level of Wheaton college students (often the Colson’s Scholars nearest peers) for prisoners, prisoner reentry, and the Colson Scholarship.

Alpha, in particular, perceived that the Colson Scholarship represented significant value for the Wheaton community:

The Wheaton College traditional student, [and] traditional faculty if you will, as they encounter this segment of society—because often you're insulated if you grew up in a traditional family, you know, that's affluent and educated and . . . you don't come up close with it. You always look at people as if they're different, if you will. And [since the scholarship is there] you get a chance to see people that . . . change—Wheaton College with its rich historical biblical background and presence, I think that it's fitting to have a scholarship of this nature that’s available.
So not only is the Colson Scholarship of immense value to the Scholars themselves, it appears that there may be a secondary value for the community.

Since their values collectively create the environment surrounding the Colson Scholarship, the values of Wheaton administration, faculty, staff, and students regarding prisoner reentry and the Colson Scholarship, as well as how those values might affect current and future Colson Scholars ought to be further investigated (e.g., how having ex-offenders of color on a predominantly White campus might serve to reinforce potential stereotypes of majority students, faculty, and administration).

**Address indebtedness as a portion of the scholarship application process.** This implication for practice does not mean that I am suggesting the Colson Scholarship program dismiss students who have incoming debt from consideration as candidates. However, I advocate for debt and budget counseling prior to and during the application process in hopes of reducing or even eliminating Scholars’ debt before they come to Wheaton. Although this may delay a Scholar’s education temporarily or extend a Scholar’s time-to-degree, students who are able to complete such rigorous financial counseling with positive outcomes may demonstrate their buy-in and desire to pursue the scholarship in a similar manner to those who completed the High Road wilderness survival program. More research is needed into just how realistic such an ideal may be for uneducated ex-offenders and how such a practice might be differentiated by ability-to-pay.

Initially, based on the extant literature, I fully expected to be making some sort of suggestion to increase students’ contribution to their educations. The main reason for this was my exposure to PSCE researchers who found that the retention and academic success of incarcerated populations was higher when they financially contributed to their educations, even if that contribution was quite nominal (Sanford & Foster, 2012). Before this study, that seemed a real
win-win solution; however, this study disabused me of the notion that this was feasible. Even with the significant funding the participants received, several experienced real financial deficiencies, and in at least once case, needed to secure additional educational loans while moving through the program. In other cases, participants came to Wheaton believing the Scholarship would be covering certain incidentals that it did not cover (e.g., insurance and books).

Despite the recommendation of Sanford and Foster (2012), it seemed that the participants I interviewed were so financially dependent upon the Colson Scholarship during their time at Wheaton that they had little to no ability to contribute to their educations outside of covering their own living expenses, textbooks, and/or food. Since ex-felons generally fall into the category of low-income students, even when they do enroll in institutions of higher education, they are significantly less likely than individuals of other demographic groups to graduate (Baum et al., 2013; Crayton & Neusteter, 2008). Thus, Scholars contributing to their own educations seems highly impractical, unless it were a post-graduation alumni contribution once the new graduate gained full-time employment—and even then, their ability to pay is worthy of investigation.

**Pursue scholarship replication.** The Scholarship as existent—although there is room for improvement—seems to be a distinct success. A natural question then would be whether or not the program is replicable, and whether or not similar successes are repeatable elsewhere. During the interviews, the Scholar participants reflected on the possibility of replicating the Colson Scholarship program.

Most former Scholars interviewed believed replication of the Colson Scholarship to be possible but that a successful duplication of the program would require the new host institution to undergo extensive preparation to develop the same pervasive sense of genuine empathy, social justice emphasis, redemptive nature, and supportive infrastructure that existed at Wheaton before
the Scholarship began there, and continues to envelope its success. As a result, some believed the program might be less successful in a secular environment because they believed that Wheaton’s Christian environment and emphasis on spiritual formation emphasized a high level of faculty investment and a sense of belongingness within the campus community.

On the contrary, one participant felt that replicating the Scholarship across secular campuses could offer Scholars options with more diverse faculty and student bodies. Another felt that duplication could open educational access for correctional populations who may not be academically competitive but could still benefit from the education. Finally, one Scholar felt that replication was essential to enabling future Scholars to acclimate themselves to campus culture while also remaining geographically close to established “healthy networks [that], to take them out of, may in some ways be detrimental.”

Whether urging replication at secular or faith-based institutions, participants who felt the program should be replicated elsewhere cited several supporting reasons. Namely, they cited limited educational opportunities for ex-offenders, a belief in the possibility of change, an opportunity for those who have been blessed to give back to others, and an opportunity to effect change for a worthy population as reasons to repeat the Colson Scholarship broadly. However, even while championing the benefits of replication, one participant warned against short-circuiting proper risk management practices, such as the adequate and thorough screening of Colson Scholar applicants, for the sheer purpose of rapid duplication.

**Bridge the racial diversity gap.** Due to the overrepresentation of individuals of color behind bars (Petersilia, 2003), this reality perhaps ought to be similarly reflected in the percentages of students both applying to, and being admitted into, the Colson Scholarship. On a campus that is predominantly White, this presents significant opportunities to expand the campus
community’s thinking around issues of diversity and Otherness in meaningful ways. The Office of Multicultural Affairs in such an environment can do much more than simply wait for individual Scholars of color and other underrepresented students to approach it for services. Rather, it can proactively seek to implement training and initiatives that continue to bridge gaps and help administration, faculty, staff, and students work together to create a campus culture that values inclusion and offers students safe and welcoming spaces. Although the administration should set the tone for inclusion, the Office of Multicultural Affairs can take the initiative to perpetuate such messaging as pervasively as possible throughout the campus culture.

**Provide flexible scheduling where possible.** It is not always easy or even possible to cater to students’ work and life schedules, nor should there be an expectation for colleges to do so. However, where possible, Wheaton would do well to investigate ways in which it might “meet a Scholar in the middle” with some level of flexibility around their work schedules. One participant mentioned the added stress his inflexible schedule created for him (which revolved around mandatory chapel) causing him significant financial struggle. It seemed a bit out of balance to that adult student, who had run his own business for years, and who was trying to work to provide for his family—an ex-felon who was actually able to secure a job off campus, a hard enough feat—that he was required to miss two days of work a week because of an hour of chapel that fell in the middle of each of those workdays. I would recommend considering these conflicts on a case-by-case basis as well as considering whether needs (like those met by chapel) are, or can be, fulfilled in that individual Scholar’s life in other avenues. Perhaps the student and institution could have met in the middle and the participant could have attended just one fewer chapel service per week. Even the one day of work he would have been able to add could have made a significant difference to his family’s financial struggles.
**Involve Scholars in prison ministry.** This group is one for whom coping strategies included persevering through educational struggles by remembering that they began their education for the purpose of serving others. With that idea in mind, they became frustrated that they did not have more opportunities to be involved in prison ministries. Several participants expressed general dissatisfaction that they were not able to be more active in giving back to incarcerated populations during their time at Wheaton, and Wheaton would do well to try to intentionally plan more opportunities for direct ministry to this population.

**Pass Scholar suggestions on to future Scholars.** The Colson Scholars interviewed thought themselves to be different and “not normal” on the campus, and that is true to some extent. A former Colson Scholar would seem to be the best candidate to truly understand the challenges of a current or future Colson Scholar. Thus, one of the interviewees wrote a document entitled “How to Make it as a Colson Scholar at Wheaton College: Suggestions and Tips.” Although I chose not to review this document during the analysis stage, I did consult the document after generating the findings and found that it underscored much of what I had found.

In the pamphlet, this participant encouraged fellow Scholars to pray, ask questions, get to know their professors, get to know other students, take advantage of the Academic Counseling Office, discipline themselves to work hard, read strategically, make adequate time for Bible reading as they did regular course reading, take classes from a variety of professors, attend every class, get involved in church, pace themselves, be themselves, guard against cynicism, and strive for balance. Such a brochure, if not currently used, seems valuable to distribute to new Colson Scholars upon their arrivals. Although my participants mentioned doing several of these things, many had to arrive at these as coping mechanisms birthed through trial and error as opposed to
Encourage realistic post-graduation expectations. As evident from the seven stage process of participants’ transitions into, through, and out of Wheaton College, especially in light of their having to deal with vastly divergent expectations and reality, I must address the Scholar participants’ post-graduation expectations. At times it was hard to tell whether the “Chuck Colson-size” dreams or “rock star” pressure that participants mentioned they felt was pressure the scholarship program placed upon them or pressure they placed upon themselves to live up to the investment and show Wheaton that those contributions were not wasted. As the subsequent model revealed, participants eventually judged the pressure of those “Chuck Colson-size” expectations as unrealistic and found that a significant investment that changed the life of even just one person was a worthy investment of their educations. Even the Colson Scholar participants knew that “Chuck Colson-size” expectations were unrealistic, though perhaps not impossible.

Nevertheless, Wheaton College must be aware and sensitive to the pressure it—or the program ideal—places upon the Scholar in addition to the concurrent stressors in that individual’s life. Even without that added pressure, participants were already conflicted as they realized that their poor choices resulted in a delayed pursuit of higher education that necessarily shortened the window in which they could earn an education and gain the type of job or ministry experience and network connections post-graduation that a person would typically need to rise to the level of influence sought in order to meet their high expectations.

Because of these issues connecting to employment, as long as the programs’ participants remain a manageable number, I advocate a small committee comprised of the Scholar, the
academic advisor, the career services representative, and the recognized mentor all meeting
together at least once a semester for the first three years and twice a semester in the Scholar’s
senior year in order to address the moving out aspect, help create realistic expectations, and help
give the Scholars the tools they need to meet those expectations. Specifically, I believe there
ought to be a formalized and documented transition plan where goals are intentionally set, and
steps with accountability attached, are then taken to meet them. As the program grows, I believe
a dedicated career services associate, who specializes in the unique concerns of ex-offender
populations seeking employment, ought to replace the committee for an even higher level of direct
care. This individual would meet with Scholars, develop transition plans, and keep track of them
to provide support and connections long after they become alumni.

**Implications for Future Research**

In this study, I identified many areas that need further research. Broadly, they relate to the
roles of family, criminal history, transfer credit, and the High Road experience in Scholars’
decisions to attend and complete college. Also in view are research suggestions related to non-
completers and retention as well as unfunded ex-felons’ college experiences. As it stands, only
speculation could answer some of the research questions that have surfaced as a result of this
study, including how replication of the program at other institutions could affect future Scholars,
how the Christian-identification scholarship requirement affects future Scholar recruitment, why
participants never mentioned Wheaton as a viable option for their children, how career and
academic advising could be enhanced for ex-felons, or how student faith development and
identity development processes might differ for ex-offender populations. All of these questions
lay the groundwork for future research that could further inform scholarship and practice.
What roles does family play in ex-felons’ attending and completing college? All participants experienced at least some degree of hesitation in applying for the Colson Scholarship. Based on what was learned from the Colson Scholars interviewed in this study, investigations into what factors influence some potential students to pursue higher education and some to choose other paths—and the roles that family and friends play in those decisions—would be worthwhile. For example, investigating the role familial dysfunction and various forms of abuse play on offenders’ and ex-offenders’ views of education—especially higher education—and future decisions to attend as a result of those views could inform correctional education recruitment, especially within juvenile justice contexts.

Visher and Travis (2003) found that family support was a critical element of successful reentry. Although we know that those returning citizens with stronger family ties have higher rates of post-release success (Naser & La Vigne, 2006), there is much more to learn about this pivotal influence on criminal activity (and potentially desistence). Martinez (2006) called for research to help those involved with prisoner reentry better understand families’ roles of support since “the recognition and negotiation of the former prisoner’s and family members’ roles and responsibilities upon their return home underlie many of the problems associated with a former prisoner’s return” (p. 33). (For specific recommendations on appropriate ways to operationalize family support for prisoners upon reentry, see Martinez, 2006).

How does the variance of Scholars’ criminal histories affect their experiences? Variance abounded in the criminal histories of the Colson Scholars I interviewed. It stands to reason that such individuals will likely vary in age coming to Wheaton, their experiences prior to Wheaton, the extent to which they might be continuing to be affected by institutionalization, or other variables. As the program grows, this research could provide a wealth of information
through the application of quantitative research methods, especially as these would give researchers the ability to control for other variables known to be salient. Then they could determine whether the extensiveness of criminal conviction history prior to the attempt of higher education affects Scholars’ perceptions of their higher education experiences. The participant pool would have to increase significantly through the replication of the scholarship to other campuses for such quantitative analyses to be feasible or to have a reasonable chance of producing statistically significant results.

**How might entering Wheaton without transfer credit impact future Scholars?** All six participants entered Wheaton with transfer credit, which participants note helped prepare them for college-level coursework at Wheaton College. This raises the question as to how incoming Colson Scholars who lack transfer credit or how past Colson Scholar non-completers who lacked transfer credit entering Wheaton would fare. Participants believed their community college experiences helped prepare them for their Wheaton educational pursuits, and the Colson Scholarship program’s 74% retention rate among Scholars attempting the bachelor’s degree is impressive in light of the multiple challenges they face as have been mentioned throughout the literature review and findings chapters.

More research is needed to further investigate how incoming transfer credit contributes to Colson Scholars’ success, specifically, how academic experiences differ for those who do not enter with transfer credit, although academic talent could be demonstrated in other ways as well (i.e., recent high school GPA, standardized testing, programmatic-required deliverables, past exemplars, etc.). Inquiries into the role that transfer credit plays toward students’ academic success are not only appropriate investigations for nontraditional student populations in general,
but may also provide insight into the greater ex-offender population’s academic adjustment across all higher education institutions, not just Colson Scholars at Wheaton College.

**To what extent might the High Road experience contribute to academic success?**

Although only two Scholar participants attended the pre-Wheaton High Road wilderness survival program, both felt that there was something about the experience that would benefit future Colson Scholars. Exploring the value of such a program for ex-felon students in general appears worthwhile. Outdoor orientation programs are not unusual (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010) and may be especially poignant for this population as interacting with freedom as it exists in nature may unlock gates and bars invisible to the naked eye and known only to those who have been imprisoned; however, only additional research could begin to discover the extent to which High Road contributed to the success of Colson Scholars or their outcomes. Other wilderness-related pre-college orientation programs, such as GeoJourney at Bowling Green State University, seek to utilize “interdisciplinary and inquiry-driven field-based educational opportunities that promote critical thought about the natural world and [its] cultures . . . [in order to accelerate] the growth of student competence and confidence through academically, emotionally, and physically rigorous outdoor experiences” (GeoJourney, 2015, para. 2).

**What might Scholar non-completers teach us about support and ex-felon retention?**

The choice to exclude non-degree-completing Colson Scholars from the study was a delimitation elaborated upon in Chapter III. Looking back on what I have learned from my participants, however, I would likely rethink that notion if given the opportunity. These participants taught me that even if they would have failed to complete their bachelor’s degrees at Wheaton, they still gained so much from having attended. Thus, the outcomes and experiences of non-completers
certainly would be worthy and investigable, even if such a study might necessitate, or could be improved by, the application of a different theoretical framework.

**How do unfunded ex-felons’ college experiences differ?** A delimitation of this study from its inception was that all participants are ex-felons who were recipients of a specific scholarship program. Left unanswered is the question of what the experiences of ex-felons would be if they attended higher education without such significant funding support (which happens every day for untold numbers across the country) and how this dynamic impacts their educational outcomes and persistence to graduation.

**How might differing institutional types affect future Scholars’ experiences?** No non-Christian or secular campuses are represented in this study because the Scholarship occurs at one location—Wheaton College, a Christian liberal arts campus. As such, a gap remains in that we do not know how the Colson Scholarship would exist differently on other campuses lacking the unique influences of this single institution under study.

Based on the findings of assets, coping mechanisms, reasons for disclosure, supports, and outcomes these participants reported that are so distinctly tied to their beliefs, it is difficult to say whether campuses of other faiths or no faith would have provided the spiritual support and theological content these Colson Scholar participants reported needing for their faith and worldview formation and development. Would other types of campuses draw “Colson” Scholars (it may have a different name and emphasis elsewhere) to whom and for whom matters of faith formation and spiritual development may be more central to life than represented by the operational paradigm of another institution (Benne, 2001)? This question is certainly worthy of investigation.
This concept also raises the question as to which institutions accomplish which types of development best; some may argue that for this population vocational education is best yet others may argue (as did MacKenzie, 2008) that the education offered across liberal arts colleges’ curricula can be quite effective in producing cognitive change without which no type of education at any institutional type is expected to be successful in connecting students to employment. More research is desirable, specifically into what factors of a university are more likely to result in genuine cognitive transformation than others.

How does the Christian-identification scholarship requirement affect recruitment?

Closely tied to the previous implication, another question relates to the realization that the program, regardless of how it may be duplicated in the future, currently exists on the campus of a Christian liberal arts campus with Christian identification as a criterion of applicant qualification. Private donor-endowed scholarships (especially at niche-serving institutions) often place stipulations around funding, but doubtless these requirements have significant recruitment ramifications.

For example, federal chaplains report that nearly one-third of the inmate populations under their spiritual care profess no religious faith or some religious faith other than a form of Christianity (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2008). Since these individuals would be categorically excluded from qualification for admission, more research is needed to ascertain what secular and alternative faith options might exist or could be created for these individuals. Also, because 77% of state chaplains report high incidence levels of “religious switching” (e.g., from Muslim to Protestant Christian or Protestant Christian to Muslim) (Boddie & Funk, 2012), the possibility of feigned, short-term conversions for the purpose of scholarship eligibility exist. (No evidence at all exists among these six participants that that notion may have existed here.) Future
research is need to ascertain precisely how the scholarship opportunity is shared with potential candidates and, as measured by surveying the admissions committee, how effectively the program is able to draw qualified applicants for admission.

**Why did participants not mention their children attending Wheaton?** Despite their overall positive recollections of their time at Wheaton and the distinct gratefulness they felt for having received the scholarship, not one Colson Scholar participant interviewed ever mentioned having encouraged Wheaton attendance for their adult children, encouraging their teen children to consider Wheaton, or expecting that their younger children would one day enroll in their alma mater. For me, that came as somewhat of a surprise. Perhaps as Wheaton graduates they still feel that the school is out of reach for them financially as they help provide for their children’s college educations. Or perhaps they may have glossed over some of the Wheaton-specific challenges that they did not deem relevant to the interview but that would have affected their encouragement of their children to attend the college. Or perhaps Wheaton’s level of selectivity is at issue. Future research with this population might add clarity that perhaps Wheaton could address with these alumni in order to potentially draw their children as students.

**How could career and academic advising have been enhanced for ex-felons?** In hindsight, I regret not asking participants more about how they believed the career and academic advising they suggested should be implemented. Repeatedly, the research literature has revealed the two variables most critical to successful reentry into society are education and employment (Lockwood et al., 2012). Given that evidence, as well as what we know about social stigma surrounding ex-offender status (Rose & Clear, 2001; Copenhaver et al., 2007; LeBel, 2012), it seems preferable now to have asked these participants for their specific input on exactly how current career services and academic advising departments of our colleges and universities might
best formulate, shape, and deliver these offerings in ways that are meaningful for post-graduation employability. I recommend future research on the interaction of these two variables give ex-offenders specific and substantial input.

**How might student development theories look differently for ex-offenders?** I would be very interested to learn whether future research endeavors would be successful in beginning to map some of the formative and developmental processes that this specific group of ex-felons reported occurring during their time of transition into, through, and out of higher education at Wheaton College. Given the gaps in the literature regarding this population of students, extant models of student development theory might describe how this population tends to develop faith and identity following periods of incarceration and institutionalization.

**Faith development.** As previously mentioned, it is important to conduct additional research into post-correctional post-secondary students’ faith development using theories such as Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development. On the one hand, the effects on the institutionalization of the prison environment (Goffman, 1961; Haney, 2003) and the embrace of the prison code (Johnson, 2011) may stunt potential Scholars’ faith development on the inside so that they are not in age-typical stages upon release from prison or entrance at Wheaton.

On the other hand, the volume of time available in the prison environment, the variety and regularity of faith-based offerings available there, and the high level of introspection and religious motivation of this particular participant population, may actually result in potential Colson Scholars having a more robust faith development upon release (Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006). Although Parks’ (2000) emphases on community and connection, big questions, and the importance of mentoring were themes throughout the interviews, more space remains for research to appropriately apply faith development theories to this population.
Identity development. Other student identity development theories in general may offer additional ways to foster understanding of how Colson Scholar participants viewed their higher education transitions. For example, participants’ spoke about change in general, the changes they saw in themselves, and the psychological and real distance they placed between themselves and their pasts. However, their specific word choices and chosen phrasing often revealed that they may not have embraced their non-criminal identities as fully as they may think—or at least that acceptance of their new identification of self is still undergoing formation.

It does seem that the identity development of ex-felons in higher education may be somewhat different from other populations. In terms of social capital, returning citizens question who they are, their value, their membership in society, and reflect on their disenfranchisement (Rose & Clear, 2001). Those who choose pro-social perspectives of self can become positive role models, capable guardians, and offer improved lives for their children through accepting pro-social norms and values increasing their integration with greater society (Rose & Clear, 2001). Those who adopt an anti-social perspective can experience increased family conflict and disruption, negative effects on their children, reduced self-esteem, and a greater development of deviance, and isolation (Rose & Clear, 2001). Clearly, “the identity effects of reentry” merit further investigation (Rose & Clear, 2001). The application of student identity development theory may offer a valuable framework through which to explore some of these dynamics of identity, stigma, ex-offender status, and self-forgiveness.

Conclusions

Without exception, I found the Colson Scholar participants to be extremely bright, self-aware individuals who were impressively articulate communicators, passionate about the possibility for change, and humbled by their experiences as Colson Scholars. Even when sharing
accounts that perhaps did not always portray aspects of Wheaton College, the Institute for Prison Ministries, or the Colson Scholarship in the best light, they always attempted to be honest while striving to be gracious because they not only wanted the scholarship to survive, but to thrive. They knew that their contributions, if given voice, could make improvements toward that end; therefore, they agreed to be interviewed.

The time I spent with the Colson Scholar participants affected my day-to-day discussions. After spending so many hours, days, weeks, and even months living in their audio recordings and transcripts, I found myself phrasing things the way they phrased them, or responding to others with phrases they had used, especially as I journeyed through the coding and categorizing processes. I also would hear someone else use a phrase a participant had used and immediately would recall that particular moment in the interview and the point the participant was seeking to make with that statement.

Perhaps the most salient time this occurred is when my senior pastor, explaining a nearly year-long strategic planning phase to extend our church’s vision into 2030, was asked to sum it up in one word. The word he chose? One. He went on to explain how everything that the church would be doing in the next 15 years would be about one soul ministering to one other soul for life. His motto: each one, win one, follow one, lead one, and take one. As he continued describing the importance the Christian Scriptures placed on the value of one soul investing in another, I could not help but consider all six participants and how they explained that investment in one soul, how they were actively invested in one soul, and how they challenged me to be even more invested in the life of another in light of all that I have been given.

It is evident that the Colson Scholars I interviewed understand the tremendous value of the scholarship in their lives. They understand that someone sacrificed so that they could succeed and
they reported sacrificing in the difficulties of the scholarship so that it could succeed as well. The participants were quite clear why they had agreed to participate in the interview, and two explanations perhaps capture the rationale best.

First, Jonah said, “I’ve basically agreed to do [this interview] because I think it’s important for people to know how important education and exposure is to helping people re-enter society.” Alpha’s explanation was a bit more extensive:

I’m glad that you embarked upon this path of doing a dissertation on this because I think it’s sorely needed. . . . When you think about having an impact in people’s lives . . . and you think about the volume of money that we spend in the Department of Corrections in correcting behavior with the desire of modifying behavior, I think that whenever appropriate, that there’s a much better return in time educating people and spending those resources with educational pursuits with a greater likelihood of affecting permanent change versus just incarceration. . . . Obviously, there are appropriate times for incarceration; it modifies behavior as well. [However] the correctional model of just punishment alone is not what changes people; it actually can make people worse because of a concentrated environment with people with every imaginable issue in life—and the stronger attempting to dominate the weaker—and all the ramifications that come out of all that. I think there’s a much more productive way of doing corrections that is more cost effective, if the goal is affecting change versus punishment retribution. I think our educational institutions have the ability to make a greater impact on our correctional institutions in the United States . . . taking and confronting people with the impact of their actions upon other people, experiencing the emotions of what that did to another person, feeling those things, accepting responsibility. . . . Punishment is part of it, but we’re also
looking to modify behavior, and just warehousing people alone doesn’t accomplish that objective—we have all kinds of studies to that effect. That’s really what the goal is and I think that something of this nature can be helpful . . . from the perspective that we look at the cost of corrections warehousing/housing versus taking people and introducing them to different trains of thought, education if you will, with clean heads off of drugs and alcohol. . . . Many of them, not all of them, are coming from those broken home backgrounds, divorced backgrounds, introduction to drugs and alcoholism at a very young age which [impedes] maturation and development . . . and they are really ripe for educational exposures, and as they are confronted and encounter Scriptural value systems, morals, feelings, the end goal is having a safer society and really affecting meaningful change that would be much more successful. And I think a paper of this nature can help contribute to some of those things.

Even as they expressed dissatisfactions with the US criminal justice systems as currently practiced, the participants appeared to sincerely understand and appreciate the gift the Colson Scholarship granted them. Jonah vividly explained what the benefit of the scholarship was to him:

It’s kind of like you won a lottery, you know? I wasn’t really even playing a number. And so for me that was one of those God things. . . . Having something like that even in place is remarkable to me, so receiving it was an awesome blessing—it was an honor.

Similarly, Nate said:

Wheaton College is the kind of place that not only invited me there and paid for my education, but wanted me to be there, and facilitated any way that they possibly could to help me towards my degree. . . . I just couldn’t believe that, after everything I had done
and all the people I had hurt, that God was really at work in my life to provide opportunities for me to grow as a person and to learn, and to educate my heart and my mind. . . . So to be given the chance to really grow and be exposed, and to, to have my faith sharpened, and really be able to perceive deep things, and scriptural truths, and theological truths, is just a phenomenal opportunity. . . . One of the things that I’m always convicted of when I’m talking with other people, is I realize, that receiving a higher education is a rare and incredible privilege. . . . [Few] will ever have a chance to go on and get a college education. And even a smaller percentage of those people will go on to the kind of education that’s available at Wheaton College.

Interviews with these Colson Scholars has certainly helped me to realize how much I have taken my own undergraduate education—and my parents’ help paying for that—for granted in some senses, and I have a deeper sense of my own privilege (I would rather call it blessing) than I had before. Interacting with the Colson Scholar participants and hearing their stories led me to one clear and unmistakable conclusion: I set out to study ex-felons attempting higher education transitions in the context of their “great privilege” of a free, $100,000+ Wheaton education (after all, I thought, no one underwrote my education with a full tuition scholarship and I had committed no crime). However, as I progressed in the study, what I actually found was how great a privilege and blessing it is not to have had to live—and in some cases endure—a life that contained the choices that meant that I qualified for the Colson Scholarship in the first place. I have been just as profoundly blessed as have the courageous and changed men I have interviewed.

In conclusion, consider Alpha’s fitting elaboration:

I absolutely believe in personal responsibility in life and as I share with you some of the dynamics of my family life, that never takes always the personal responsibility for
personal action. But when you look at people's behavior in a vacuum, obviously external influences can control that socio-economic environment that they're nurtured in and it tends to have an impact on them. And in this case if you were to look at my extended family, you'll see that dysfunction generation after generation and what makes the difference—fortunately in my case—it was being introduced to the Gospel through some family members and other people that God placed in my life that produced that light of hope for change. . . . a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and that change which was there pre-Wheaton.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL PART A

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee’s Pseudonym:

Housekeeping:
- Introductions/Thank you/Purpose/Why interviewing them
- The interview should run approximately 4 hours and I intend to follow up at a later date to check my findings with you. We will take breaks as often as you need. Is that ok?
- The information I gather will ultimately be a part of my dissertation, and I plan to seek publication for the research findings. Even so, your identity will remain confidential.
- This interview will be recorded but the file will be destroyed at the conclusion of the dissertation publication.
- I will protect your confidentiality by having you select a pseudonym. I will be the only one who knows your real identity.
- You can decline to answer any question or aspect of the study and can end participation at any time.
- If you have any questions/concerns you can feel free to contact me. My contact info is on the informed consent form.
- Review informed consent (2 copies)

Demographic and Short Answer Information
A. The purpose of this questionnaire is to learn some general background information about you. Your responses are confidential and you may choose not to answer any or all of these questions.

1) What were your parents’ education levels?
2) Had any of your family members ever attended college, or are you the first in your family?
3) Please describe the makeup of your immediate family. Do you have adult children, and if so, how many of them have attended or graduated from college?
4) What is the highest level of education or highest degree you have completed? Did you go on for further study following your graduation from Wheaton College? If yes, how long after your graduation at Wheaton did you wait before applying? What field did you choose? Did you complete that degree?
5) What is your current job? year of birth? race/ethnicity? valid email address?
6) Do you receive any governmental assistance?
7) How did you find out about the Colson Scholarship? How long did you wait after release to apply to the Colson Scholarship?
8) Did you attend Wheaton College part-time or full-time? How long did it take you to graduate from Wheaton College?
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL PART B

A. General:

1) Did you face obstacles while pursuing your education that students who are not former offenders do not experience? If so, what are some examples?
2) What supports did you rely on to help you through these experiences?
3) Tell me about a time that you may have chosen to disclose your criminal past to someone. What factors went into that decision and why? How did you feel following the disclosure? What was the reaction of the individual, and is that what you expected?
4) Tell me about a time that you may have chosen NOT to disclose your criminal past to someone. What factors went into that decision and why?

B. Scholarship:

1) What has receiving this scholarship meant to you? How has receiving the scholarship helped/benefited you?
2) Should this scholarship be replicated at other campuses? Why, or why not?

C. Transitions:

1) What precipitated your transition into higher education?
2) How do you feel about the timing in which you accessed higher education (e.g., in terms of the age of your peers)?
3) What aspects of the transition into higher education were outside your control?
4) How did your roles in life change as result of transitioning into, through, and out of higher education?
5) What sources of stress existed in your life during your years at Wheaton College and how effectively did you cope with that stress? Why?
6) Who had the most influence in helping you to successfully complete your degree at Wheaton? Why?

D. Employment/Financial:

1) How effective do you believe your education was in preparing you to seek, gain, and maintain employment?
2) Did you work a job, either part-time or full-time, during the time you were at Wheaton College and receiving the scholarship? If so, how many hours per week?
3) How difficult was it to secure transportation to and from classes, or to find the funding to purchase your books?
4) What experiences have you had trying to get a job that those who are not ex-offenders would not have had to experience?
E. Academic:

1) Why did you enter higher education? Why did you choose the major/degree program you chose? What were your future goals/plans?
2) How well prepared do you believe you were for college-level coursework when you came to Wheaton?
3) Did you take advantage of any services offered by Wheaton College to improve your academic success (e.g., tutoring, personal counseling, etc.)? If so, what was that like?
4) As a student, did you ever feel inadequate?
5) Did you ever feel like withdrawing from school? If so, what kept you motivated to stay?
6) Tell me about graduation from Wheaton College. How did that feel?

F. Faith/Ministry:

1) What influence did the development of your faith have on your experiences transitioning into college, through college, and out of college?
2) How are you investing in the lives of others as a result of the sacrifice made on your behalf? What does that ability to reinvest in others mean to you?

G. Wrap-up:

1) What do you think about your Wheaton experiences now, looking back? How do they impact how you see yourself today?
2) If you could go back and change any higher education-related experience you had, what would you choose to change, and why? Is there anything that you expected your Wheaton college experience to give you that it did not?
3) Have you been re-arrested, re-convicted, or re-incarcerated since you were released and attended Wheaton College? In your opinion, why or why not? What factors have contributed to your periods of success or failure?
4) Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I perhaps should have asked you but did not?

Housekeeping:

Thank the interviewee for participating in the interview. Remind him that his responses and any future interviews between the two of you will remain confidential.
Dear Potential Participant,

You are receiving this email because you graduated from Wheaton College with a bachelor’s degree funded through the Charles W. Colson Scholarship program.

Recently, the Institute for Prison Ministries at Wheaton College authorized an independent third-party researcher to conduct qualitative research investigating the experiences of Colson Scholars during their time on Wheaton College’s campus. This research may help college student personnel better understand the experiences of returning citizens on college campuses in order to enhance student services, improve campus experiences, and aid higher education transitions for this population on our nation’s campuses.

Please be advised that you all may receive a reminder email (similar to this email) approximately one week after this email is sent, even if you have already connected with Ms. Leary. The reason for this is I am not permitted to know who speaks with Ms. Leary due to confidentiality concerns, so I will just send this blanket email as a reminder. Finally, a mailed packet with similar materials as these attachments may also be sent to all of you, just in case we are unable to reach you by email.

The researcher, Ms. Jude Leary, would appreciate the opportunity to conduct one 4-hour interview with any former Colson Scholar who has earned a bachelor’s degree from Wheaton. Due to confidentiality protections, I am not permitted to know who does and does not choose to participate; I ask that you do not respond to this email but I encourage you to read Ms. Leary’s recruitment letter attached to this email and respond directly to her at the email and/or phone number listed in the attachment with any questions or to schedule an interview. For those of you who agree to participate, there will be a one-hour follow-up conversation to review and check Ms. Leary’s findings for accuracy in their reflection of your actual experiences.

Your participation is completely voluntary. It is certainly your choice to participate or not participate, and a decision not to participate will not negatively affect your relationship with the Institute for Prison Ministries, the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, or Bowling Green State University.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Dr. Karen Swanson
Director of the Institute for Prison Ministries
Billy Graham Center
Wheaton College

Attachment: Appendices D & E
APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Participant,

Hi, my name is Jude Leary. Just to give you a little background -- the study that I am conducting is part of my dissertation for a PhD in Higher Education Administration. I’m specifically interested in the experiences of Colson Scholars before, during, and after their higher education transitions at Wheaton College. I hope to perform interviews in the next two months around this topic, but I need to work to get them scheduled soon, as I would be coming from Ohio to conduct any interviews. Although this study on the Colson Scholarship recipients will be a published dissertation, the identities of my participants will be kept confidential at all times. In other words, readers will know that your responses reflect the experiences of a Colson Scholar but they—including Dr. Swanson—will not know who said what or which Colson Scholars chose to participate and who did not.

As Dr. Swanson’s e-mail indicates, I am seeking all Colson Scholars who completed a bachelor’s degree at Wheaton College to participate in one 4-hour interview. That interview would be conducted in person as I would travel to a neutral location in the city where you live. There will be no cost associated with the interview for you (outside of traveling to the neutral location) as I will work to plan it around your schedule for best day of the week and time of day. It is a distinct honor to have the privilege of interviewing you and I value your responses a great deal. I will do what is in my power to make the interview as convenient for you as possible to encourage your participation.

The only other obligation from you is that I will plan to follow up in the fall or spring to perform a process called member-checking where you would review my study in order to help me understand how well I am reflecting the experiences you communicated to me during our interview. Despite my intention to follow up with you as I review my findings, please understand that should you agree to participate, you will have the ability to remove yourself from the study at any time without consequence. The overall time commitment, including the four-hour interview and the follow-up, is five hours.

My goal is to schedule interviews in April and conduct the interviews in the latter half of May and the first half of June depending on participant availability. If you would, please be in touch with me as soon as possible to let me know of your willingness to participate in the study. I pursue this research in an attempt to improve both the Colson Scholarship and higher education more broadly for formerly incarcerated individuals. Once your decision to participate is made, and you contact me, we can move forward with making arrangements (i.e. time/date/location) to meet. Thank you so very much for your time. You may contact me at jleary@bgsu.edu or at (440) 725-0807 anytime for any question related to this research. I look very forward to hearing from you and I highly value your contribution to my research.

Sincerely,
Judith “Jude” Leary, Doctoral Candidate
Higher Education Administration
Bowling Green State University
Dear Participant,

My name is Judith “Jude” Leary, and I am a student in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University working under the direction of Dr. Ellen Broido. My topic, Funding Faithful Returning Citizens: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Higher Education Transitions of Ex-Offender Scholarship Recipients, is focused on the higher education transitions and related experiences of Colson Scholars at Wheaton College. As a Colson Scholar, you are being asked to participate in this research and the information provided below is designed to help you make an informed decision about your participation in this research.

The main purpose of this research is to gather information on the higher education experiences of individuals in transition following a period of incarceration. Higher education administrators and other personnel may learn how to better serve ex-offender populations in higher education as a result of this research, and although there is no direct monetary benefit to you for participating in this research, you may appreciate the opportunity to describe your experiences as a Colson Scholar in order to provide a foundation for suggested recommendations that might improve on-campus and off-campus services and supports for formerly-incarcerated students involved in higher education transitions.

If you choose to take part in this study, your primary contribution will be one face-to-face audio-recorded interview of approximately four hours (with breaks as needed) at a neutral, quiet location within an approximately fifteen-minute radius of your home. However, if you prefer a Skype, telephone, or email interview, I will honor that request and conduct the interview via the means you request. In such a scenario (i.e., if participation should occur via Skype, telephone, or email), I will read the consent document to you and you may read along (as the informed consent form has been included in the original emails and the regular posted mail). If no such request is made, the standard interview format will remain the face-to-face four-hour interview accomplished as described above, that is, at a neutral and quiet location within 15 minutes of your home.

You will also be contacted once approximately two to three months following the interview via email or phone (your choice) to review the in-progress findings and share your thoughts as to the accuracy of the conclusions I have reached. The total commitment should be about five hours.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions (or not do a particular task) or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not negatively affect any relationship you
may have with Wheaton College, the Institute for Prison Ministries, the Billy Graham Center, or Bowling Green State University.

Should you choose to participate, it is important that you are informed that all information will be kept confidential, and your name will not be reported or disclosed in the presentation materials. The audio recording from our interview will be password protected on the recording device and data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office or home when the researcher is not present. Only the four members of this research committee will have access to the data, and your name will never be associated with your responses (you will be able to choose a pseudonym at the outset of the interview in order to guarantee your confidentiality). At the conclusion of the study, all associated files and folders will be destroyed.

Any risks associated with this study are minimal, and are no more than the risk experienced in daily life activities. All personal information that is supplied by participants will be kept confidential, and even if a breach of confidentiality were to occur with the files and/or recordings, only your pseudonym would be on the recording, not your real name.

If you have any questions at all about the research, this interview, the informed consent form, or your participation in the research, please do not hesitate to contact me, Jude Leary, at (440) 725-0807 or at jleary@bgsu.edu. As listed above, my advisor, Dr. Ellen Broido, is also available for contact at (419) 372-7382 or at ebroido@bgsu.edu, if necessary. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you so much for your time.

Should you choose to participate, at the start of the interview you will receive this document again and will be asked to either check the box or refuse to check the box. By checking the box next to the “I give my consent…” statement below, you are allowing this researcher to utilize your information to conduct research and present and publish findings based on that research.

Consent:

☐ By checking this box, I am indicating my agreement to participate in the research study entitled *Funding Faithful Returning Citizens: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Higher Education Transitions of Ex-Offender Scholarship Recipients*. I give my consent to utilize the information provided in this interview to be presented in a future research project on Colson Scholars within the confidentiality terms previously mentioned. I certify that the information on this form has been explained to me, that I voluntarily consent to the conditions of the study as described, that I understand that I may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, that I have received a copy of this consent form, that I am voluntarily consenting to be audio-recorded for the purposes of this interview, and that I have had the opportunity to have all of my questions answered. I voluntarily consent to participate in this research.

Judith “Jude” Leary, Doctoral Candidate
Higher Education Administration
Bowling Green State University
APPENDIX F: HSRB INITIAL APPROVAL

DATE: April 14, 2014
TO: Judith Leary
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [587976-2] FUNDING FAITHFUL FELONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSITIONS OF EX-OFFENDER SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: April 14, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: April 3, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the “footer” area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 17 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

ALL UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 3, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.
Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX G: HSRB EXTENSION APPROVAL

DATE: March 6, 2015
TO: Judith Leary
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [587976-3] FUNDING FAITHFUL FELONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSITIONS OF EX-OFFENDER SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 6, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: March 5, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on March 5, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained with the Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.