



Research Articles

Human Services/Social Work Students with Criminal Justice Involvement and Internships: A Closer Look at the Prison to College to Career Pathway

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This qualitative study focuses on issues and dilemmas that confront human services students who have had contact with the criminal justice system. Researchers note an increase in the number of community college students, many of whom are adult learners with criminal justice histories and are interested in a career in the helping professions. Interviews reveal unanticipated roadblocks when students must be placed in internships—this in spite of the open access community colleges provide and the human services/social work professional emphasis on social justice. Students describe the process of disclosing their justice involvement as both arduous and healing and profoundly important for themselves, their fellow students, and future clients. Strategies to support and advocate for justice-involved students in an education for social justice context is discussed, as well as the need for advocating for the acceptance of justice-involved student interns in a variety of practice settings.

Keywords: human services and justice-involved students, social justice education

Epperson and Pettus-Davis (2015) note that mass incarceration is on the decline. In 2008, more than 735,000 individuals were released from state and federal prisons, with five million individuals on probation or parole (Emsellem, 2010). It is well documented that vocational and higher education can reduce recidivism (Stevens & Ward, 1997; Wheeler & Patterson, 2008), and community colleges represent an open door for students who might otherwise not have access to higher education (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). Recently, community college enrollment has increased exponentially (Nash, Zaback, & State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2011). Gonzalez (2012) writes “That broad access—the bedrock of the community-college system—has prepared hundreds of millions of people for transfer to four-year colleges or entry into the work force” (p. 1).

Dovetailing with the spirit of the community college mission are the core values of both the human services and social work professions, as codified by the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS, 1996) and the National Association for Social Workers (NASW, 2008). The fundamental concepts of social justice for marginalized groups and the promotion of an individual’s capacity to grow and change are at the epicenter of professional social work and human service ethics. Thus, it is not surprising that Halkovic and Greene (2015) note that college students who have been incarcerated are “overwhelmingly... focused on helping others—particularly vulnerable and underserved populations” (p. 13). In a similar vein, Rose (2015) suggests that community college human services programs are entry points for students with prior felony convictions and are drawn to human services and social work professions. As such, human services professionals and members of the higher education community must be ready to meet the needs of justice-involved community college students and advocate for their unobstructed access to educational and internship opportunities.

Community college systems routinely do not require an applicant to state whether or not they have been convicted of a felony (commonly known as “banning the box”). Yet, because human services agencies increasingly require extensive background checks for prospective student interns, the first obstacle may arise when students with felonies prepare for their required field experience or internship. Rose (2015) indicates “This may mark the first time in a student’s educational career where he or she must disclose his or her ex-offender status” (p. 1). Thus, in spite of higher education’s impact on recidivism, the open access community colleges provide, and the professions’ emphasis on social justice and equitable treatment of all individuals, justice-involved students may encounter unforeseen barriers to a career in human services or social work.

The current study is based on qualitative research conducted in a community college that is part of a public university system in a large northeastern urban center. Findings from student interviews illuminate a duality over disclosing criminal justice involvement in the college and internship settings. Students describe the process, alternately, as uncomfortable and arduous, healing, and profoundly helpful for their fellow students, and future clients. When thoughtfully facilitated by an instructor or agency supervisor, this disclosure can decrease misconceptions about justice-involved persons and can be instrumental in the process of educating future human service workers for social justice. Snyder, Peeler, & May (2008) describe a framework for integrating dialogue about human diversity and the development of a social justice framework in social work education that is a useful construct here. Although, social work educators strive to include anti-oppression and social justice education into curricula, the stigma and exclusion that

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justice-involved students experience has not yet been part of the conversation. Equally compelling is Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical construct of habitus, which emerged as a salient framework in both understanding the advantages or "cultural capital" that students carry with them (Bourdieu, 1989; Emirbayer & Williams, 2005) and in "lift[ing] the societal curtain on the hidden structural and individual-level processes that perpetuate inequality" (Fram, 2004, p. 560). In light of the significance of student self-disclosure, strategies that can be applied to the classroom and internship to support appropriate disclosure of involvement with the criminal justice system both in school and in the internship are suggested. In order to broaden the aperture, we also describe findings from interviews with human service field placement supervisors regarding their perceptions about admitting and supervising student interns who have had a history that involves felony convictions.

The data suggest that attention must be directed toward a deeper understanding of the pathway from college to career among justice-involved students. By steering justice-involved students towards re-entry programs for their internships, questions of equity and fairness arise. Are we, as Alexander beseeches "challeng[ing] the discrimination faced by formerly incarcerated and provid[ing] services for newly released," (Alexander, 2012, p. 176) or, are higher education and human services professionals participating in the persistence of exclusionary practices that limit the social, economic, and professional opportunities of students who have felony records?

The study also brings to light an additional concern that has yet to be considered by researchers and educators in higher education. The majority of justice-involved students interviewed were adult learners in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Thus, we suggest that the journey these non-traditional students take from prison, to higher education, and to employment can hold even greater challenges. This exploration of the experiences of justice-involved students, a group that is understudied and may experience discrimination and exclusion within the very profession that should advocate on their behalf, reveals the necessity for a clearer understanding of the obstacles these students face. Thus, we suggest the need for further inquiry that starts at the critical intersection of justice involvement, adult learners, and the barriers to equity and justice on the journey from prison to college to human services employment.

Background/review of the literature

Research related to justice-involved students and professional human service and social work education have received scant attention in professional literature. The search revealed no previous studies with a focus on justice-involved community college students majoring in the helping professions. Most articles reviewed are theoretical rather than empirical and focus on concerns about the gatekeeping function of social work educators and admissions committees. It is important to note that unlike community college human services programs, undergraduate and graduate social work programs are competitive and selective

(Topuzova, 2006). Broderson, Swick, & Richman, (2009) suggested, “evaluating applicants with criminal records may be one of the toughest of these admissions or “gate keeping” decisions” (p. 349). The dilemma concerns the potential risk of allowing admission to an unsuitable candidate with the potential for unfairly judging someone simply because of their ex-offender status (Leedy & Smith, 2005). Admission of ex-offenders into social work programs is often debated among social work scholars. Magen and Emerman (2000) argued that ex-offenders should be denied admission to professional social work programs. “People convicted of a felony lose certain rights. . . Denial of admission to professional education is simply one aspect of social sanction” (Magen & Emerman, 2000, p. 401). The authors argued that the primary responsibility of social work educators is to protect clients and that this outweighs the risk of admitting convicted felons, as “recidivism research has shown . . . that the chance of criminal behavior being repeated is very high” (Magen & Emerman, 2000, p. 405). Countering their position, Scott and Zeiger (2000) argued that professional social work core values embrace the concepts of service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The authors suggested that a person “in recovery from past behavioral difficulties [can be] potentially more sensitized and influential when helping people in crisis” (p. 410).

Cowburn and Nelson (2008) and Nelson and Cowburn (2010) also outlined the conflicting concerns in admitting ex-offenders to social work programs. They grapple with the question of whether or not programs should accept such students, because of their commitment to social justice and equity, or if the focus should be on “the risk that ex-offenders (may) pose to the general public, the social work profession...and particularly social work service users” (Cowburn & Nelson, 2008, p. 297). Nelson and Cowburn (2010) did not propose a monolithic, one-size-fits-all admissions policy and warned “the implication of applying a formulaic risk assessment is that it can be applied in a non-reflective way” (p.1095).

Broderson et al. (2009) discussed social work field supervisors’ perception of risk as influenced by the nature of the crime. Their findings suggested that field educators (i.e., supervisors of social work students employed in a social service agency) are most influenced by the type of crime and the amount of time that has elapsed since the crime was committed. Of the supervisors surveyed, 93.8% said they would reject a student who had been convicted of homicide. However, 35.8% said an important mitigating factor to acceptance of a student who had committed a violent crime would be if the applicant had been released more than 10 years ago and had no further convictions. The authors stated that supervisors’ responses were at odds with empirical evidence that indicates that steady employment and education are more significantly correlated with reduced risk of recidivism than criminal conviction type (Broderson et al., 2009).

Although the literature reviewed above focuses on selective graduate social work programs, there are implications for open admissions community college programs. Allowing students with felony convictions into the field, ascertaining their suitability for the profession, the tension between promoting their equitable access to internships and career, and protecting clients emerged as salient concerns for field agency staff members interviewed in this study as well.

Research purpose

With a paucity of empirical literature on students with criminal justice histories in community college who are majoring in human services, the purpose of this exploratory study is to shed light on the students themselves by examining in-school and out-of-school experiences, as well as the ways in which they navigate classroom and internship interactions. In order to capture a broader understanding of the issues that impact students who have had contact with the criminal justice system, interviews with agency staff members who routinely supervise community college human services students were conducted as well. As noted previously, it is not uncommon for human services agencies to require prospective student interns to be fingerprinted and/or to undergo a criminal background check before they are accepted for field experience. Thus, for community college human services students who have been involved with the criminal justice system, entrance into field training can be a lengthy and burdensome process where they are confronted with disclosing their justice involvement in order to continue their education. This can potentially delay or derail a student's progress toward graduation. Hence the study focuses on the perceived risks and benefits of disclosing justice involvement to professors, to fellow students, and to prospective supervisors. As educators and social workers, working to insure equitable and just treatment for students is an integral aspect of professional obligation. Thus, developing a clearer view of the obstacles students face is a necessary first step in developing strategies to support unobstructed entrée into the world of work and to identify the points at which advocacy on behalf of these students might be indicated.

Method

As this is an exploratory project, researchers utilized a qualitative approach, which allows for a glimpse of the world as seen by the respondents and encourages the mining of emergent theoretical constructs. The researchers applied a combination of a phenomenological inquiry, which focuses on the subjective experience of the individual (Merriam, 2002), and a grounded theoretical approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which helps the researcher to move from a description of what is happening to an understanding of the process by which it is happening in order to understand the participants' responses.

Extensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with human services and social work students at a large urban, northeastern community college, using a purposive and quasi-snowball sampling technique. Respondents were drawn from referrals obtained from human services professors who were teaching a field experience integrative seminar. Following the approved IRB protocol, participants completed consent forms explaining that interviews were kept confidential, anonymity was guaranteed, and each student would receive a \$20 gift card, whether or not they completed the interview. As mentioned above, interviews were also conducted with staff members from a variety of social service agencies who routinely supervise human services students. Staff members were selected in order to capture a broad cross-section of agency type and field of practice focus, including aging, re-entry support, and childcare. NVivo 8 software was used as an aid in the process of inductive coding of the data.

Research questions

Although there were specific areas of inquiry that were developed in response to gaps in empirical data, a strength of qualitative exploration is that it allows for meaning to emerge. This allowed for unanticipated and uncharted terrain to be explored during the interview process. “Banning the box” in public universities is lauded as providing non-discriminatory and open access to higher education for students with felony records. However, a perverse consequence of the policy is that researchers, educators, and professional staff do not then have access to specific demographic data regarding the justice-involved students in their institutions that could be helpful in developing efforts to support and advocate for them. Consequently, questions were posed to elicit data about academic course selection, in-school experiences, living situations, family composition and sources of income.

The literature reviewed above confirms the anecdotal observations of faculty in human services programs—that identifying internships that will accept students with criminal records can be problematic. Thus, questions were intended to explore students’ experiences with obtaining internships: What was the process like? What were the obstacles and how did students endeavor to confront them? Who advocated for them, and who stood in the way? If indeed an aspect of the internship placement process requires a student to disclose their status, what was the process of sharing that information like?

Halkovic and Greene (2015) conceptualize the “gifts” that justice-involved students bring to their classrooms via the authentic sharing of their experiences that serve to develop classmates’ understanding about incarceration and the injustices inherent in the criminal justice system. Thus, researchers were prompted to inquire about perceived strengths and skills that these students bring to the classroom, the internship, and ultimately the world of human service work.

As mentioned previously, in an effort to gain a multi-dimensional understanding of the issues, researchers elected to interview social service agency staff members who routinely supervise human services students. Having supervised students with criminal justice involvement was not a prerequisite for inclusion in the study. Questions explored their concerns about justice-involved students interning in their agencies, their experiences in supervising such students, and perceptions about the appropriateness of accepting justice-involved students as interns.

Participants

In order to both cast a wide net and capture a broad perspective, the researchers chose to interview two distinct groups of respondents: justice-involved community college students majoring in human services, and the professional human service workers who supervise students in field internships.

Student demographics

While the sample is small, the data offer a preliminary point of reference that can be utilized as a starting point for further inquiry. Of the 10 students interviewed, 50% were women, 50% were men and all had been incarcerated (ranging from 10 days to 12 years). Sixty percent were African-American, 30% were of European origin, and 10% were Latinx. Only two of the students were in their twenties. Three were in their thirties, three were in their 40s and two were in their 50s. Twenty percent were employed fulltime, while 80% relied on government assistance (SSI, PA, Work-study), loans, and help from family and partners. Five were married or partnered. Three respondents had one child living at home (two were with partners, one was a single parent). All students commented that income and financial support were ongoing concerns. Three of the ten students participated in education programs while in jail or prison on a variety of charges including burglary, grand theft, drug-related crimes, and assault. The breadth of the diversity in terms of race, gender, socio-economic status, and criminal justice involvement is illuminating when considering their often resonant responses that are explored in following sections.

Agency staff demographics

Altogether, seven staff members were interviewed from agencies, including a large nursing home, three social service agencies serving reentering individuals and their families, a reentry program serving college students, an after-school program, and a program serving special needs individuals. All were female, three Latinx, two white, and one African-American. Five of the seven held graduate degrees in social work or public administration. All interviewees were responsible for placing and/or supervising undergraduate human services students in their respective agencies.

Results

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, NVivo 8 was utilized for coding and analysis. Several significantly resonant themes, issues, and concerns emerged that illuminate the prison to school to work pathway for justice-involved students.

Securing an internship and “all the hoops you gotta jump through”

The ten students interviewed were enthusiastic and engaged in their studies and were determined to complete their associate degrees as soon as possible. All had the goal of transferring to a social work or human services program at a senior college, and most wanted to complete a Master’s Degree in Social Work. In fact, three of the respondents are now enrolled in human services or social work programs at 4-year colleges. They candidly spoke about academic struggles (mostly math) and strategies they have developed for doing well. At the time of the interview, all students were in good academic standing. In spite of academic success, their voices here reflect

the sense of deep concern about the internship process and securing professional licensure and beyond to permanent professional employment:

That's the big one I guess. That's the thing that I was really worried about-am I gonna get placed? Am I gonna get an internship?

When you have a criminal record, you've obviously been through some things in your life and the odds are stacked against you. You don't look good on paper, you know it's hard to explain, hard to talk about. People don't want to hear it. Finding an internship has proved to be very difficult, cuz people don't want to hear it. ...Why do we have these prejudices against people that have records?

Getting through college is already really hard for anyone. Getting through college for someone that has had extreme hardships ... is even more challenging. Cuz when they face hurdles or roadblocks in their education process, they start to wonder if this is even worth it.

With a police record- I know mine isn't for doing anything to kids... just having a record, they don't want you doing anything with kids. They don't want you... Or with vulnerable populations like the elderly.

I would love to get my LCSW and of course go above that. I have to see what happens with courts, I know there's a license issue for someone like me...

... it's too hard, it's too hard. All the hoops you gotta jump through.

Finally, this student sums up the overarching concern:

You don't get sentenced to your prison time. It's life. You have a felony, that's it. You have a life sentence.

The majority of justice-involved students find internships in reentry agencies

Regardless of their concerns, the students interviewed were all ultimately placed in human services agencies for their internships with seven out of the ten students going to agencies working with justice-involved individuals (reentry agencies). It is significant to note that half of the students interviewed voiced a desire to work with children and youth. Another 20% wanted to work in a mental health setting. Additionally, students expressed interests in veterans and substance abuse. While four of the ten students had a dual interest in working with a reentry population along with another group, none articulated the desire to work exclusively with a reentry population. It appeared as though placement in reentry agencies was encouraged because there were no background checks required at these sites. Here, one student describes a conversation with a prospective supervisor in a reentry agency. Even though this student had initially wanted to work with children, she described the welcome that she received when she disclosed her criminal record:

I told [my supervisor] and she was like, that's exactly what we're looking for. We're looking for people that have been in contact with the criminal system and basically, they've changed, they've gotten a second chance. She told me that 70% of the people that actually work there have had contact with the criminal justice system.

In stark contrast, the student below recounted a grueling process when seeking approval as an intern into a mental health agency:

The first thing they wanted to know was every address I had lived in for the last 26 years. ... So after that, they wanted a certificate of disposition for every conviction and a statement about every arrest ... I had to go through and get all of these certificates of dispositions and I had to write a statement about every one.

While agency staff member respondents expressed the sentiment that they would welcome a justice-involved student as an intern, they spoke about needing “more information on the nature of the [justice involvement], how long ago, what was going on” as part of the approval process. Students, on the other hand were concerned about disclosing criminal justice involvement both to prospective supervisors as well as to professors. Here a student describes the experience of disclosing to the professor who was responsible for securing student placements:

I've been kind of hiding it, because I'm more like ashamed but now, recently I'm more open with it because like I have to, like that's the only way I'm going to accept it and move on from it. I sent [my professor] an email and it was 2-3 weeks before the semester started and she said thank you for telling me, I'll help you get a place.

Justice involvement as an advantage in the field

While students articulated reluctance to share information about their felony records, they also spoke of their experiences as an asset to the agencies that they would be interning with because it would increase their capacities for empathy, compassion, and capacity to advocate on behalf of clients. Below, a student who had not intended on interning in a reentry agency, begins to see her justice involvement as a way to connect with the clients:

It was kinda like, it was a couple of guys entering and um, one of them dropped something, I think it was on my foot or my leg and they was like, 'Oh, I'm sorry ma'am. And it was like, it gave me a funny feeling cause it was like, 'me and you are the same, you just don't know it.'

The idea that their criminal justice history was an asset when working with clients in a variety of settings, was expressed by these students:

I was able to use my history to kind of relate to and understand what some of the clients were going through.

As I worked there, and got closer to some people that I worked with, I disclosed some things about my past. But um, overall my experiences gave me more insight into what was going on with people.

Look at everything I've gone through and where I'm at and I mean constantly even when I was younger, I've always been protecting those around me. I've always tried to help others-all at the same time keeping myself up.

While the majority of agency staff interviewed were not aware of whether or not they had supervised students with criminal justice histories, they articulated a similar perspective about the strengths that the students would bring to their internships. These statements are emblematic of that sentiment:

[I]t really helps them to understand where they [the clients] are coming from and how complex all the issues are around it. Before, during and after. And the impact on the family. Like all of it I think is really important.

That... having gone through that experience which I cannot even imagine. I mean it seems you have to find some inner strength to be able to get through it and be able to come back into the world.

Yet staff also articulated concerns that justice-involved students might have a tendency to over identify with clients or expect too much from them based on their own experiences. One staff person framed the issue as needing to learn to “navigate boundaries.” Here, other staff interviewees echo the concern:

If you had experiences with the criminal justice system and you are working in a space where everyone or just about everyone has been involved in the criminal justice, then you are going to have to worry about over-identifying, assumptions, placing your journey as similar to the next person.

I think about assigning cases. Are some things possibly triggering for that person?

The case for broadening the internship experiences of justice-involved students

Only one staff respondent clearly identifies the goal of broadening the internship opportunities of justice-involved students. Here this staff person responds to the question of whether or not the agency would encourage a justice-involved student to intern there:

So we are not adverse to it at all and like I said, it's a plus so long as we are also supporting the student in expanding their social and professional network.

This statement provides a compelling rationale for working to expand internship and future career options for justice-involved students. By advocating for students to intern in agencies that serve a diverse range of clients, rather than limiting their internship experiences to reentry

programs, educators would develop wider access to agencies that could serve as future employers for these students. This is significant as there is evidence that there are far fewer professional social work careers in criminal justice than in settings such as health care, mental health, and public education (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006).

Disclosing justice involvement in the classroom: “You always think about the response and reaction.”

As stated previously, most students interviewed were in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, with only two in their 20s. These mature students are adults with rich life experiences forged by their lived experiences in and out of prison. Anastas (2010) noted that adult learners have more developed complex cognitive abilities and skills that are welcomed in the areas of human services and social work. Thus, when these adult learners join classroom settings with more traditional students, a rich interaction may ensue, where the adult learner is able to share their experience with the younger adults thereby achieving educationally richer classroom experiences for all. The educator must be prepared to moderate discussions and insure a safe space for self-disclosure in order to promote dialogue that can decrease the exclusion that justice-involved students experience. Noted previously was the consistent theme iterated in each interview regarding the uncertainty and reticence about disclosing their past and being judged or branded as a “criminal.” This stigma is referred to as “invisible stripes” (Maruna as cited in Halkovic & Greene, 2015) that are carried by students with documented criminal records when they are trying to integrate into society but are faced with the dilemma of disclosing their experience with the criminal justice system. It is this dilemma of disclosure that may hinder these adult student learners’ positive experience in the college environment:

It’s tough... I don’t think I would be forth-coming, but to just go to the front of the class, and just volunteer that information. You have 17-18 year olds, I’m sure they haven’t been through anything that dramatic.

In spite of their apprehension, the student below noted how disclosure could in fact be meaningful to younger students:

You always think about the response and reaction... a lot of people can relate to that. For the most part it was a father, and uncle or a brother that went to prison so they know what it’s like for that individual coming home and trying to progress in life-trying to move forward.

Another student echoes almost the identical sentiment:

Every time I mention it in class, of course, people turn and they look. And then somewhere along the line, they could see my age, and they might say ‘well, yeah, I could see that.’ You know, cuz a lot of these students have family members who have been through it-- uncle, a brother, a father.

For human services students with justice involvement who are to be placed in an internship, disclosure may not be a choice and thus, can be even more anxiety producing. Even in settings where persons with criminal records are the clients, staff interviewees reported that some programs within those agencies, specifically those that serve children, must check backgrounds of prospective interns. As one staff supervisor stated, “it’s always important to know the details...I have to think about the needs of the organization, right? That’s where I’m coming from.” Indeed, many staff members appeared to grapple with the idea of what to do in situations where demand for disclosure by the student, and duty to care for the clients being served are at odds. Here a staff member puts it bluntly, yet aptly:

In my opinion it’s none of their damn business. But I understand the reason behind them wanting to ask because they need to think about where would be possible good placement for that individual if they were in certain categories.

It is our contention that the pedagogic work here involves not only recognizing the “gifts” or the strengths that students bring to their classrooms and internships but also integrating the efforts into the larger context of social justice education in human services and social work.

For students, the necessity for revealing conviction history, either in the internship or in the classroom, is coupled with the power that disclosing can have for the student and others in the college community, as this student succinctly points out:

I stood up and said well I’m an ex-offender... And that kinda made them stop and eat their words, it kinda made them have to think and be challenged, ‘you’re a criminal but you’re in class with me.’ Like ‘maybe you’re not such a bad person’...It made me angry but it served its purpose when I had to speak out.

Discussion

The data reveal a rich and nuanced understanding of the journey that justice-involved students undertake as they complete their human services education. Through an iterative and discursive analysis of the data, what emerged are the students’ conflicting notions about the perceived costs and benefits of disclosing justice involvement in the classroom and the internship. These concerns are compounded for adult learners who may feel alienated both because of their age and criminal justice status.

The 20th century sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was particularly concerned about the inequities that institutions of higher education can perpetuate. His construct of ‘habitus’ or the multiple and sometimes converging internalized dispositions that actors inhabit, (Bourdieu, 1989; Emirbayer & Williams, 2005) were strongly resonant. This was particularly significant when considering the role of community college educators in facilitating the often times necessary, yet potentially healing and transformative self-disclosure in the college setting and prospective internship agency. Students and supervisors keenly articulated the benefits of sharing the selves or

habitués they carry in the classroom and internship agency. Halovic and Greene's (2015) conceptualization of the "gifts" that justice-involved students bring to their classrooms via the authentic sharing of their experiences that can serve to develop classmates' understanding about incarceration and criminal justice, was clearly evident in the interviews. Yet just as significantly, they struggled with when, how, and if to disclose these experiences in classroom and internship. Anastas (2010) also referenced Bourdieu's concept of habitus and points out that 'identity dissonance' can occur when educational or professional norms do not fit an aspect of identity (p. 73). However, Bourdieu suggests that habitus is not immutable. Yet it is reshaping can require "arduous and lengthy labor, like an athlete's training" (Grenfell, 2012, p. 718). Bourdieu describes this as "pedagogic work" or the process of inculcation which must last long enough to produce a durable training... capable of perpetuating itself after the [pedagogic action] has ceased (as cited in Grenfell, 2012, p. 109).

It is our contention that the pedagogic work here involves not only recognizing the 'gifts' or the strengths that students bring to their classrooms and internships but also integrating the efforts into the larger context of social justice education in human services and social work. We suggest that in order to reduce the stigmatization and exclusion that justice-involved students have experienced, human services and social work educators must be prepared to create what Snyder et al. (2008) envisioned as "a classroom climate that is respectful and supportive—a collective space in which students are helped to develop the confidence that conflict surrounding contentious topics can be worked through" (p. 184). In so doing, the students' sense of shame and uncertainty about revealing justice involvement is diminished and the strengths that they bring to the classroom, their prospective clients, and to the social work profession can be recognized, championed, and sustained. This, we posit, is the obligation of social work educators and field supervisors who are bound by the ethics of the profession.

We also note the absence of articulated policies concerning the internship placement for student interns with justice involvement that is clear and unambiguous. In many cases, staff respondents iterated a concern for agency clients that superseded the educational needs of justice-involved students as is articulated here: "We want to protect [clients] from any outside danger that there might be but we are open." We suggest that the client protection and expansion of internship options to students with justice involvement should not be competing goals. As one supervisor noted: "There should be training for people that are going to supervise [justice-involved] people that become interns." Human services educators, who participate in the development of internships and deployment of students to field agencies, are well-positioned to work with agencies to develop policies and procedures for developing internships for justice-involved students. These students bring compassion, empathy, and a strong sense of purpose to the human services agencies that they train in and will ultimately work in. As one student, who dreams of starting an agency to work with troubled youth, so aptly stated:

Before I was incarcerated, I didn't know what I wanted to do...after I got arrested and I went into treatment, the seed was planted in my head, about social work...I have a powerful story and you know my life experience, you know the things I've been through in my life, have to go for some kind of good one day.

Suggestions for further inquiry

This study was exploratory, and due to the small sample size, may not be generalizable. However, the issues raised warrant further investigation. While the focus of this study considered justice-involved community college students who were majoring in human services, we suggest that the concerns raised here may have implications for a larger set of justice-involved students. As noted above, justice-involved students do not have to check a box in order to enroll in most community colleges. As such, institutions do not have data that may in fact be helpful in uncovering unmet needs and developing supportive and potentially empowering services and programs for this population. Thus, a larger quantitative study is warranted.

Our study also indicated that adult learners might represent a significant proportion of justice-involved community college students. Thus, an investigation with a more finely honed focus on that population is warranted as well. The data revealed that self-disclosure of sensitive information regarding justice involvement can be difficult for students. In spite of these expressed apprehensions, student and staff interviews indicated compelling benefits to the college and internship/agency community when students disclose and share their experiences with the criminal justice system. Thus, the authors suggest that future research must focus on developing pedagogical strategies that can support planned and appropriate self-disclosure for justice-involved students. Finally, as social work and human services researchers, we are bound by our ethical tenet to advocate for social justice. Access to college functions as a form of social justice in that the institution becomes part of the community reentry in which students can begin to heal and transform their visions as to what is and can be possible. It is our moral and ethical duty as educators to make our students feel welcomed when they enter educational institutions and to advocate for their unhindered journeys from prison to college to employment.

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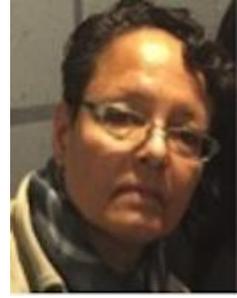
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