

Transformational Resentment and Educational Persistence:

Understanding Reentry Education in Maine

by Mara Sanchez

INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education programs have been recognized as one of the most successful ways to reduce recidivism—the cycle of incarceration, reentry, and return to the criminal justice system (Bozick et al. 2018). A widely cited statistic among prison education advocates is that 66 percent of incarcerated individuals recidivate in 3 years of release, and 82 percent recidivate in 10 years of release (Antenangeli and Durose 2021), but individuals who participate in educational programming while incarcerated “are 32% less likely to recidivate when compared with inmates who did not participate in correctional education programs” according to the study by Bozick et al. (2018: 402).

Such a reduction in recidivism rates would be good news for Maine, as educational programming is part of the Maine Model of Corrections,¹ which focuses on safety, well-being, and reducing barriers to rehabilitation. Rooted in the concepts of normalization and humanization, the model prioritizes respect, destigmatization, and modernization. But despite the rehabilitative focus of the model, as of 2021, less than 5 percent of the state’s approximately 1,700 incarcerated individuals were enrolled in postsecondary education programs, likely reflecting constraints such as staffing or space capacity rather than interest (MDOC 2021, 2022). The low participation rate provides a potential upside in terms of analysis and impact: the group of individuals who have received educational programming while incarcerated is small enough so the state can track outcomes. According to the MDOC’s report (2021), between 2010 and 2020, of the 39 releases of individuals who completed either an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, there have been only 2 returns. There is, however, little publicly available information on how many students who were formerly incarcerated achieve postsecondary degrees after returning to their communities, resulting in real gaps in understanding about the reentry education

experiences of individuals who started pursuing postsecondary degrees while in prison.

This research brief addresses these gaps by sharing findings from a qualitative study I conducted of six formerly incarcerated Mainers (Sanchez 2024). The stories of the individuals who participated in the study reveal that success after incarceration is neither accidental nor inevitable. It is built through defiance, improvisation, and an insistence on being seen as more than a criminal record. These narratives also introduce the concept of *transformational resentment*, a motivational force rooted in the drive to prove others wrong, push back against stigma, and reclaim identity through academic success. Unlike many alumni of traditional universities and colleges, alumni of higher education prison programs in Maine do not get invited to campus events after their release, nor do they receive newsletters with links to campus job boards or other social networking benefits. There is also little formal follow up from prison education program staff after students return home, which makes it difficult to understand the impact of prison education programming in Maine beyond measures of recidivism. The findings of this recent study highlight the need for individualized reentry supports in Maine that include housing, mentorship, and guidance, preferably from an individual with lived experience, to help navigate resources.

As higher education in prison programs continue to respond to federal policy changes like expanded Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, a new phase of the movement demands more deliberation around and bridging between prison education programming and reentry education efforts. As access to education in prison expands, there is opportunity to guide investments in postsecondary access, including consideration of what happens after release and of how to nurture the internal strengths and strategies that this study highlights. Without a coordinated approach to educational reentry, there is a real risk of

diminishing the potential of the considerable investments that have already been made in prison education programs across the country.

RESEARCH STUDY OVERVIEW

The study discussed here was conducted in 2024 in Maine as a part of my dissertation research at the University of Southern Maine, entitled “Carceral Degrees: Successful Postsecondary Educational Pathways for Students Impacted by the Criminal Justice System in Maine.” For this study, six formerly incarcerated participants shared details about their educational journeys and reentry experiences. These participants had either continued their postsecondary degree after being released from incarceration or started a second postsecondary degree after completing their first postsecondary degree while incarcerated. I collected data through in-depth interviews conducted both in person and via videoconference, as well as from archival materials provided by participants. Though the sample size was small (n=6), this study considered all data as a collective case study, an approach that is valuable for policy insight and uses findings to help understand the population and other individual cases not included in the study (Stake 2006).

The six participants were from different regions of Maine, with varied experiences of incarceration, education, and reentry. Brandon was pursuing a PhD, having completed degrees both during and after incarceration. Danielle had completed an associate degree in a sober house and was preparing for credentialing as a substance use counselor. Nicole was navigating transitional housing while finishing her final courses. James, (a pseudonym), had advanced from prison-based education to a master’s program in tech and entrepreneurship. Dick had prior college degrees but struggled with unstable housing and disability. Linda, who started her college courses in her 50s while incarcerated, completed a master’s degree and founded a nonprofit for formerly incarcerated women. Though all six participants came from various socioeconomic backgrounds, all identified and presented as racially White. This is not surprising given that the study was conducted in Maine, the least racially diverse state in the nation with a predominantly White population.² Even with such a homogeneous population, however, racial disparities still exist in Maine, particularly for Black and Indigenous Mainers. Therefore, the lack of racial diversity in this study is a clear limitation. Beyond race, the

demographics of the group were split evenly between those who had been in men’s correction facilities and those who had been in women’s correction facilities. They had a diversity of experiences with the criminal justice system before incarceration, and the group was equally comprised of those with stable housing upon reentry and those who experienced housing instability. All had experienced trauma, abuse, and neglect in their childhood and adolescence to varying degrees. Some struggled with substance use issues prior to incarceration. All except one participant had enrolled in at least one postsecondary course or program before experiencing incarceration.

Though the participants had different life paths that led to their incarceration, all six were able to persist with postsecondary degrees and coursework after reentry. It is unknown how many participants in higher education in prison programs across Maine reenter their communities before completing a degree started either inside prison or before incarceration. The reentry process can disrupt educational progress, and many formerly incarcerated students struggle to persist with their education after returning home (Goldstein 2025). For the six participants in the study, those challenges were real, and they provide valuable insight into the questions about education after reentry.

KEY FINDINGS

All six participants related education to self-care or treatment, described their own education journeys as different from most students’, and felt motivated to prove others wrong, which one participant labeled “transformational resentment.” These themes point to a shared perception of education as critical to overcoming stigma and actualizing a productive identity. I present the study’s findings organized by three interrelated themes: education as self-care, transformational resentment, and the overwhelming nature of reentry.

Education as Self-Care

Beyond describing their personal education journeys and motivations for persisting with education, all six participants discussed postsecondary education as having a powerful impact on their lives and changing them and their lives in meaningful ways. Participants described their education experiences using terms such as *self-care* or *treatment* or reflecting on their education as providing them with coping tools or skills.

Danielle reflected on the time before her incarceration and her educational program as one without self-care:

That was my life; I brought these kids in this world. My life revolved around them. But in all honesty, it just really shouldn't have been like that because it brought me to a place where I couldn't be the mother because I was—no self-care.

Danielle also described how education gave her coping skills: “It was really good, and I always remembered that I’m going to take this time to work on me because this is one way that I’ve learned different coping skills.”

James also discussed education and how he was spending his time. He described pursuing education as a part of several habits he had developed:

I read every day. Going on 101 days tomorrow, nonstop reading, journaling, listening to inspirational stuff and being accountable and not missing it at all. That's been a challenging habit for me to develop, but it's also really rewarding, and it keeps my head on straight. It keeps me thinking about cutting-edge positivity stuff and being able to inspire others.

James speculated about how others might perceive or question his actions. He wondered: “People are like, what is this person doing? Why does this person always have something intelligent to say? Why does this person look so healthy?” James saw his education as a rewarding habit, which indicates a conception of pursuing education as something healthy he could do for himself.

Linda went beyond describing education in self-care terms, defining education as a part of rehabilitation: “Education, first of all, to me, it changes your relationship to yourself and your relationship to others, which is what rehabilitation is all about. It does it in a way that no other type of programming could ever do.” With this statement, Linda placed education in the domain of rehabilitative programming in a carceral context, associating education with other rehabilitative programming such as treatment.

Dick also associated education with a type of treatment, specifically mental health treatment. Dick discussed the connection between education and his own mental health: “Grad school has done more for me than any therapist.” Dick further reflected on how what he has learned in graduate school has helped him make sense of his own childhood: “Because of all the theories that I’ve learned, like especially attachment theory, I can see why I was the way I was.” Dick openly discussed his mental health

struggles and engaging in regular weekly therapy for years, so by saying that education had done more for him than therapy he indicates the caliber of the treatment role that education played in his life.

Nicole also discussed education in treatment terms. While discussing an award that she received from her college acknowledging her academic accomplishments, Nicole described how education helped her heal. Nicole also described the community she had connected with, saying: “Just being with my people from Maine. That’s healing. But then also just the love that everybody else gives me. I love it. And I hope it never goes away.” Nicole further connected the healing education provided her with other self-care terms, such as loving herself and parenting her inner child.

For Brandon, educational programming was a part of a process of self-improvement. He described his pursuit of education as the gateway to many other activities that he helped his personal growth:

Education was really the foundation that made me want to continue to better my life in other ways too. Because I saw the personal growth I was experiencing through every semester. I felt like I was a brand-new, better person with a deeper understanding of myself and the world.

After being transferred to another facility and seeing its negative influence on his mental health, Brandon realized that education had given him coping tools to deal with his environment. For Brandon, much like for the other participants, education provided something beyond academic knowledge that helped him take better care of himself and be a healthier person.

Transformational Resentment

The participants also all shared a strong motivation to succeed despite the limitations placed on them by society. They wanted to prove people wrong and defy expectations. Brandon labeled the phenomenon of feeling motivated to prove others wrong as “transformational resentment.” Although other recent studies of formerly incarcerated students have found that formerly incarcerated have reported feeling “out of place” (Torres 2020: 119), or disrespected (Truesdale-Moore and Lewis 2023), none have discussed a feeling like the transformational resentment described by the participants in this study. Brandon first described transformational resentment as he recalled his experience of entering prison:

I went into prison with this kind of transformational resentment in some ways, where I was like... this system... hurt me and hurt my victim and hurt my family and hurt my community with no care about what the ramifications... were. But I also went into it with, like... now it's on me because I've learned that the system will fail me, right?... Over time, when I saw the dysfunctionality and the impossibility of the prison system and how stupid it all is, that continued to fuel it.

Similar to Brandon's descriptions of transformational resentment, Danielle discussed her enjoyment of behaving or presenting herself in ways that went against the preconceived notions of others. Danielle described attending meetings with outside direct service providers about her children and how it was "such a good feeling" to go against their expectations of what she might be like as an incarcerated person:

If I had a meeting, I got on Zoom and I got to be a part of that meeting... It was good to understand because I was taking these classes, psychology being one of them... they were kind of stepping back because I feel like the stigma that surrounds incarceration... probably they were waiting for me to come in wearing a black and white jumpsuit. This is all up in their head thinking this is probably how I'm going to show up... pulling my ball along. And I didn't. And I came there, and I was present, and I was educated.

Danielle saw this experience as a time when she could prove the general stereotype of incarcerated individuals as wrong and instead show up as someone who was educated on topics about her children. James also felt a sense of judgment or stigma from others and described a drive to prove people wrong. James stated: "I have somewhat of a desire to prove people wrong. And that's a healthy desire." At another point, James discussed a desire to succeed to send a message to those who had not supported him:

I can say, you know what, you lost your chance to hire me. That's what it is. And to be able to speak about that on an open sphere in the public and say yes, the rose that grew from the crack in the concrete.

James characterized himself as something valuable that was being overlooked and described how he was looking forward to publicly expressing his own worth. Like James, Dick described feeling stigma due to his experiences with incarceration and discussed feeling motivated by the desire to prove others wrong:

I like proving people wrong, too, to be honest with you. People told me you're never going to make it, you're never going to graduate, never going to get licensed. I'm seriously thinking about getting my PhD... I truly love proving people wrong about me.

Nicole also described experiences of overcoming adversity and feeling motivated to persist with her education. Calling herself "the comeback queen" and "resilient," she said, "I came back from some crazy situations. And it's just funny, and I love to show people that." While reflecting on her educational experiences, Linda described wanting to succeed despite external perceptions. After explaining that she was the only person from the women's facility graduating at that time, Linda recalled that there was no ceremony. She expressed anger at the 11-year gap between when educational access was provided at the men's facility and when it was provided at the women's facility:

I was pissed off. And it might have been a weird way to express it. It still bothers me to this day that there are men who went in the same year that I did who are already getting their master's degree when I signed up for my first class.

Like the other participants, Linda's educational persistence was complicated and she was spurred to continue because of an awareness of external forces or perceptions: the MDOC's authority over what educational programming was offered. This awareness "flipped the switch" to help her realize that she didn't need permission. For all participants, educational persistence is related to awareness of negative external perceptions or stigma and expressions of defiance or desire to overcome those negative perceptions.

The Overwhelming Nature of Reentry

All six participants described reentry as overwhelming. They faced diverse challenges and obstacles, but their reaction to reentry was similar. Dick experienced homelessness after reentry and had to start over several times after four different periods of incarceration. He described his most recent reentry: "I got out again thinking my whole life is done with and I'm never going to get my job back and it doesn't matter if I go back to school." Dick's housing insecurity made it difficult for him to see a path forward with his education. Though Nicole did not experience homelessness, she described her reentry as "a lot of traumatic, weird things happening all at once." She also described how the demands of finding work and paying her bills put

college on “the back burner.” For Nicole, the overwhelming nature of reentry made her educational persistence more difficult. Danielle also doubted her ability to persist with education due to the overwhelming nature of her reentry. She recalled contacting her advisor with concerns that she couldn’t pass her courses, and then contacting her again the next day to apologize for overreacting. Danielle’s thought that she would not be able to continue at the high level of academic performance she had maintained during her incarceration because so much was happening in her life; her brother died shortly after her reentry and her husband was still in active addiction. Between juggling various familial and personal relationships, the grief of losing a family member, and continuing with school, Danielle reflected: “I’ve literally been nonstop. I’ve been nonstop since I got out.” However, staying busy with education and other activities also kept Danielle straight during that time “where so much chaos was happening that could have taken over.” Danielle recognized her educational persistence both as part of what made reentry overwhelming and also as a way to get through the transition.

James discussed negotiating relationships with his family as part of what made the transition from incarceration overwhelming. He described a professor who was concerned about passing his courses amid the family drama: “There’s been courses where professors more than once have been like, ‘Oh, I’m really concerned you’re not going to pass this course.’ And I’m over here dealing with crazy family situation.” James described his transition from incarceration as one that also affected his mental and emotional state: “I was sort of shell-shocked, community-wise, still getting used to being free again, trying to get used to new technology and exposure to that.”

Brandon also described feeling shell-shocked, stating that he felt numb the day he left prison. His transition from prison was unusual because “a lot of things that people deal with, I didn’t have to deal with.” Upon release, Brandon had secure housing and some financial stability, yet he felt overwhelmed by social demands even with that safety net. Brandon acknowledged that he “wasn’t realistic about the obstacles of reentry” and explained, “this reentry thing has presented me so many obstacles to living life that I, since the day that I got my comps grade back, have been engaged in a yearlong battle with broken systems.” Brandon refers to his efforts to end probation early to attend the birth of his daughter and to get a US passport for his daughter, which he was eventually able to do. All these things took time and took their toll on him. When asked what

educational support he had during that time, Brandon answered, “I had the opposite of support. And I don’t mean that in a way to villainize anybody. Literally, everybody, every single person in my life, my schoolwork was not important to them.”

Linda also described a lack of educational support during her transition from incarceration: “The truth is there wasn’t anybody advising me about reentry.... There’s the unit team down there who doesn’t really—I’m going to say the vast majority of that unit team doesn’t really care.” Linda also discussed the need for more reentry supports for individuals reentering and continuing with their education. She recalled working to build herself an educational nest so that she wouldn’t feel frantic. She then asked, “How is your mind and your body going to stay in school with all of life drawing you out again? Which is fantastic, but it can be all-consuming and completely derail everything.” Linda stated: “If somebody was going to advise me, what would have been helpful is to have a woman ahead of me who was successful.”

The five other participants also discussed the need for more reentry education supports and specifically suggested connection with individuals who had either experienced reentry or understood the needs and could help navigate resources. James expressed skepticism at any program or service being able to make “considerate and effective decisions about the environment to create for a person who is needing individualized help.” He argued for more individualized support: “I think it should be an individualized discussion with caseworkers that are a separate entity from the university or the DOC. That are a third party that is supportive.”

Brandon admitted that though there were services available to support him through his Ph.D. program, he “didn’t get out with a mindset of being willing to ask for support.” He went on to describe what might have been helpful for him, saying, “It would be great if I could have had one or two people really dedicated to following up with me every week.” Dick described the best people to help others experiencing reentry from prison, using a story from his own experience:

I remember one time when I was in a peer role, and a guy had just come out probably doing 20 years, and he was verbally vomiting all over me about his frustration. I was like, “Dude, I got it. I totally hear you. I know what you’re talking about.” And he looked at me and he’s like, “How the fuck can you understand what I’ve been through, blah, blah, blah.” I’m like, “Well, dude, I got 10 years in the system.

I do have an understanding of what you're going through. When I got out, I was homeless. I was living on the streets. I had nothing." And then he looked at me totally different. And that's when it clicked for both of us and that's when he started to trust me... that instance, it formed an instant connection, instant trust. We worked together for a long time. I supported getting him on the right road again.

Danielle and Nicole had similar descriptions of the educational support that reentering citizens commonly need. According to Nicole,

A lot of us will talk about how we don't even know how to apply for financial aid by ourselves. We don't know how to sign up for classes. We don't know how to do all of that because when we're inside, that was done for us. Ordering books... that type of stuff and checking in having... somebody that knows about what the system impacted population needs and making sure they're okay.

PROFILE OF SUCCESSFUL PERSISTENCE

Best practices literature on reentry support acknowledges the importance of recognizing individualized needs and risk factors for incarcerated populations and the unique pathways individuals take into the criminal justice system (NIJ 2023). What have not been discussed in the literature are the distinct pathways this population takes out of the criminal justice system, especially when higher education is a part of that process. In most places across the country, prison education programming has limited course offerings, choices of majors, and institutional providers.

The findings of this study raise the possibility of potential benefits for formerly incarcerated students who recognize and claim their own differences in comparison to both their incarcerated peers and their nonincarcerated peers and who convert the stigma of incarceration to a strength. The participants related their pursuit of education to self-care or healing, describing it as a vital tool for recovery from trauma, addiction, or the emotional weight of incarceration. Their educational journeys rarely followed traditional paths; instead, they were marked by detours, disruptions, and restarts that reflected both the challenges of reentry and the tenacity required to overcome such challenges. They were fueled by a powerful desire to prove others wrong due to their experiences of being underestimated or stigmatized. This internal transformational resentment compensated for the lack of formal reentry support. Despite barriers, these individuals persisted,

drawing on lived experience as a source of strength, forging unique paths to success, and exemplifying what it means to reclaim one's future through education.

This feeling of transformational resentment potentially connects with ideas of identity reconstruction in reentry scholarship, or the rebuilding of self-narratives in opposition to institutional degradation (Khan 2023). It also resonates with concepts from posttraumatic growth theory, wherein individuals derive meaning and personal strength through responses to adversity (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). Transformative resentment could also be related to the concept of resilience, a term that comes up frequently in research involving formerly incarcerated people (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2014). Resilience is associated with many positive outcomes and benefits for individuals, especially those pursuing educational attainment (Brewer et al. 2019).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAINE

Although this research brief presents the findings from a small qualitative study, combined with national research, it can be used to create policy around this issue. National research has addressed the resource gaps for individuals reentering their communities after a period of incarceration (Lindquist et al. 2023), including for individuals pursuing education after reentry (Anderson et al. 2024) and other studies have recommended the need for individualized supports for this population (Abeyta 2022). Participants in this study also recommend individualized supports for formerly incarcerated students, supports that recognize the unique pathways these individuals take through education and leverage their resilience or transformational resentment.

Scholarship on this population also points out the mistake that educators make in looking at formerly incarcerated students as having the same needs as traditional students (Tewksbury and Ross 2017). Formerly incarcerated students who successfully complete their educations are unique, and their uniqueness may relate to their successful persistence. Educators and educational institutions need to be prepared to support the needs of this population differently.

Maine has invested in its rehabilitative model of corrections but risks undermining the goals of that model without a coordinated reentry strategy and policies that recognizes the continuum of support needed to carry individuals through the reentry process.

Several actionable policy implications emerge from this study:

1. **Equity in educational access:** Women's correctional facilities in Maine lag behind men's facilities in the postsecondary programs offered. It is imperative that Maine addresses this inequality by ensuring equity in access between facilities that serve different subpopulations.
2. **Establish reentry centers or navigators:** Participants called for structured reentry services. Centers or navigators could provide critical services, such as Wi-Fi access, financial aid navigation, and career counseling. Educational institutions that accept Pell grants for students while they are incarcerated should be the first to put resources towards supporting this population after reentry.
3. **Integrate education with employment:** Formerly incarcerated individuals often face challenges finding meaningful employment. Programs that integrate education with internships, apprenticeships, and remote work opportunities could bridge this gap.
4. **Create incentives for data collection and public reporting:** Comprehensive data on educational outcomes and demographics would provide valuable insights to inform policy and program development. The lack of data on this population, especially after reentry, is a critical blind spot.
5. **Expand funding:** Increased educational access, persistence, and success has multidimensional benefits that reach far beyond individuals and institutions. These outcomes are money well spent.

CONCLUSION

By implementing strategies inspired by the voices of formerly incarcerated Maine students, Maine could become a national leader in reentry education. The small scale of the state's correctional system combined with the rehabilitative philosophy of the Maine Model of Corrections creates an opportunity. Considering that more than 95 percent of incarcerated individuals will one day return to their communities (Hughes and James 2002) and the many known benefits of postsecondary education to incarcerated individuals, it is clear that education cannot end at the prison gate. By providing the right support and resources, Maine can build on the successes of its prison education programs to reduce recidivism, strengthen communities, and create a more equitable society.

NOTES

- 1 "Maine Model of Corrections: Rebuilding and Transforming Lives," Maine Department of Corrections, <https://www.maine.gov/corrections/mmc>
- 2 "Race and Ethnicity," US Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile/Maine?g=040XX00US23#race-and-ethnicity>

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