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ABSTRACT: Much of the present research available on formerly incarcerated Black males (FIBMs) focuses primarily on their criminal experiences and subsequent effects on their personal lives, employment options, and repeat offenses. Despite the overwhelming number of Black men in the U.S. criminal justice system and the country’s goal of increasing the proportion of citizens who earn postsecondary degrees, little is known about the postsecondary adjustment and transition experiences of FIBMs. This exploratory study represents an initial attempt to address a gap in the research by centering on two questions: (a) What challenges do FIBMs face in adjusting and transitioning to college? (b) What supports help FIBMs persist in college? Employing a constructivist qualitative
approach, FIBMs were interviewed via one-on-one semi-structured interviews over a period of 12 months at public research institutions within the United States. Analysis of interview data yielded three major themes: (a) ex-offender label as impediment and motivation for higher education, (b) importance of support networks, and (c) development of resiliency. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing college degree attainment rates among citizens is a major federal policy priority in the United States, which is currently 14th in the world in the proportion of citizens with college degrees (Hughes, 2012). The importance of this national goal is evidenced in at least three ways: a recent State of the Union address by President Barack Obama, increased educational investment by federal agencies and private organizations, and new or revised policies to support enrollment in and graduation from college. First, President Barack Obama shared in a recent State of the Union address that “more individuals with college degrees will allow the U.S. to compete in a global market” and stressed that his administration will continue to make strides to reduce college costs for students and families, as well as earmark resources for promoting college completion initiatives (Obama, 2009). In addition, federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Education and National Science Foundation, as well as private organizations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have invested considerable financial resources to supporting interventions that effectively promote degree attainment among students and returning adult populations (U. S. Department of Education, 2006). It is estimated that billions of dollars are spent each year by public and private agencies on pre-college outreach programs, summer bridge initiatives, remedial and developmental courses, as well as marketing campaigns about the impact of college on one’s social and economic prospects (Bettinger & Long, 2009).

Last, but not least, lawmakers have formulated new polices or revised existing ones to support enrollment in and graduation from college, such as college tuition tax credits, Federal Pell Grants, and the “GI Bill for the 21st Century.” As the U.S. focuses on building a stronger nation through education, the federal government has increased financial assistance for higher education costs for historically underserved populations. The new GI Bill, for instance, offers a substantial increase in educational benefits for members of the military.
who have served on active duty for at least three months since September 11, 2001. Additionally, veterans are allowed up to fifteen years—after they leave active duty—to use their educational assistance benefits. According to the National Center for Veterans and Statistics (2011) approximately 555,329 veterans used 21st Century GI Bill benefits and 90,657 individuals utilized survivor and dependent educational assistance in fiscal year 2011.

Prioritizing college degree attainment rates places much needed attention on effective strategies for recruiting new and retaining existing students in higher education. The Obama administration has set a national goal of having the world’s largest share of college graduates by 2020. To reach this goal, many more adults will need to enroll in college and other institutions of higher learning. Postsecondary institutions will also need to develop and employ more effective recruitment and retention strategies that support historically underrepresented and underserved students who, to date, have been all too often deemed “not college material” (Nelson, 2010), such as those who were once incarcerated or have criminal records.

The U.S. now boasts the highest incarceration rates in the world (Walmsley, 2009). Recent data suggest that over 2.2 million individuals are incarcerated at the federal, state, and local level. Of those incarcerated, Black men are disproportionately represented (Alexander, 2012; Jones, 2007; Pettit, 315). For instance, Black men constitute nearly 1 million of the total population in incarceration and shockingly, Black men are imprisoned at more than 6 times the rate of White men (Glaze & Parks, 2012; National Urban League, 2007). Despite these trends, not all Black men go to jail and indeed some who were formerly incarcerated enroll in college, yet little is known about their experiences in higher education. To address this gap, the present study sought to understand the adjustment and transition experiences of formerly incarcerated Black male (FIBM) collegians at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Two research questions guided the study: (a) What challenges do FIBMs face in adjusting and transitioning to college? and (b) What supports help FIBMs persist in college? We employed a constructivist approach to investigate these questions. Before describing the study, we review the literature on this topic and operationalize the study’s framework.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The literature review for this study can be organized into two general categories: research on Black male incarceration and research on Black males in higher education. Accordingly, this literature review is organized in that way.
What We Know about Black Male Incarceration

It is sad but true that African American men are incarcerated at rates disproportionate with their presence in the U.S. population. For instance, African American men are imprisoned at more than 6 times the rate of White men (Glaze & Parks, 2012; National Urban League, 2007) and constitute 38% of people in state or federal prison (Carson & William, 2012). In fact, Black males have a 32% chance of serving time in prison in their lives. Indeed, 1 in every 13 Black males ages 30 to 34 was in prison in 2011 (Carson & William) and criminal justice data reveal “that something akin to [a] racial caste system exists in the United States” (Alexander, 2012, p.2). While African American men do not commit the majority of crimes, they are incarcerated at startlingly higher rates than their White counterparts, due in part to the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act. The legislation included mandatory minimum sentences for the distribution of cocaine, including more severe punishment for crack—disproportionately affecting Blacks—compared to powder cocaine, generally assumed to be used more often by Whites (Alexander, 2012).

Incarceration negatively affects the social and economic futures of Black men who, according to a fairly consistent body of research, already hold uncertain status in many domains of American society as they are all-too-often the least likely to graduate from high school or enroll in or complete college, yet the most likely to be unemployed or underpaid in the workforce (National Urban League, 2007). Incarceration also negatively affects whether and where a man works, how much he earns in a particular job, and the length of his employment, all of which determines whether he can access employer insurance benefits, which in turn affects help-seeking behaviors and health outcomes, to name a few (Pager, Western, & Sugie, 2009). Delaying or refusing proper treatment can contribute to overall poorer health outcomes for African American males nationally (Hammett, Gaiter, & Crawford, 1998; Weissman, Stern, Fielding, & Epstein, 1991), a group of men who already face serious health disparities. Hammett et al. (1998) note that many—prior to their incarceration experience—had limited access to primary health care or interventions, thus returning to their communities without proper preventative health education and necessary support. These trends clearly demonstrate that incarceration has far-reaching effects on both Black men and society that, without intervention, cascade over time and yield inequitable outcomes in terms of overall health, wellness, and economic stability.

Incarceration has other effects. In terms of education, incarceration may limit, if not eliminate, the ability of African American men to enjoy the socioeconomic and psychosocial benefits that a college degree affords (National Urban
For instance, we know that by age 30, almost 6 in 10 African American male high school dropouts have spent time in prison; many of these men will never pursue higher education in their lifetime, representing an enormous loss of talent. Talent loss or “disposal,” as we prefer to call it, is concerning in a democratic society that prides itself on notions of open access, meritocracy, and individualism. The depressed predicament of many African American males, especially those with correctional histories, flies in the face of liberal ideas of freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. It is this stark contradiction between “the American Dream” and the social miseries of formerly incarcerated Black men that fuels our interest in this topic and deserves scholarly attention.

There are other statistics that make this point. For instance, Black men in their 30s are nearly 3 times more likely to have been incarcerated than to earn a Bachelor’s degree (Western, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2003). Some national reports suggest that, today, there are more Black men in prison than in college (Cuyjet, 2006). Although one of us (Strayhorn, 2010a) argued elsewhere that these two groups are not entirely comparable, since the college figure reflects a generally restricted age range, it is undeniable that the large number of young Black male inmates warrants our collective attention and that incarceration—regardless of academic preparation—may derail Black males’ college aspirations. In fact, the racialized and gendered patterns to incarceration in this country may suggest a pipeline or “sorting mechanism” that jails Black men more frequently (and harshly) than all others—what Alexander (2012) refers to as the “New Jim Crow”—thereby robbing them of access to higher education as a means for upward social mobility and productive living.

Despite our hypotheses and collective concerns, much of what is known about FIBMs focuses on their pre-delinquent personal histories, experiences in the penal system, and the nature of their post-corrections transitions with a particular accent on men returning to families and communities from prison (Cooke, 2004; Miller, 1996). For example, Cooke investigated the role of joblessness and homelessness in influencing the health of men leaving prison, interviewing 17 formerly incarcerated African American men. She found that (a) doing time in prison limited the types of employment available after release, (b) incarceration shaped how they could conduct job searches, (c) men who did well after release were those who were self-employed, and (d) homelessness served as a major barrier to securing employment due to not having a permanent address. Another line of inquiry focuses on the repeat offender or recidivism behaviors, yet little to nothing is known about the ways in which FIBMs negotiate the adjustment to and transition through college. This is the gap addressed by the present study.
Our review of the literature yielded a handful of comments or reports on FIBMs in college. No definitive national statistics are available on college enrollment rates of FIBMs, but two points are important to highlight: the alarmingly high percentage of African American men that are incarcerated and the creation or revision of programs designed to assist former inmates. First, nearly 50% of all people in U.S. prisons or jails are African American men (Karsberg & Harrison, 2003) and African American men are incarcerated at more than 6 times the rate of White men (Glaze & Parks, 2012). Estimates suggest that approximately 840,000 Black men are in jail at any point in time. Comparatively, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggest that approximately 2.5 million college students are Black, about one-third of whom are men. Should these trends continue, FIBMs would represent a larger share of the pool of individuals from which we might draw potential college students, especially since Black men are already sorely underrepresented among graduating high school seniors and incoming college freshmen (Strayhorn, 2010b).

Second, justice advocates have devoted considerable energy to establishing new or revising existing programs and services that aim to rehabilitate former inmates, reduce recidivism rates, and assist past offenders in achieving adaptive functioning in society; many of these interventions encourage higher education attainment (Austin, 1996; Brugman & Bink, 2011; Devlin & Gibbs, 2010; Freudenberg et al., 2010). For instance, Brugman and Bink investigated the effects of a multi-component peer-helping program on recidivism and cognitive distortions related to returning to criminal behavior. Findings from their study suggest that the intervention reduced juvenile delinquents’ cognitive distortions, although the effect was minimal, hardly affecting the speed and seriousness of the problem. Another study by Freudenberg et al. analyzed data from 552 former inmates and found that multifaceted interventions are important in improving outcomes for formerly incarcerated men, as well as their usage of drugs and engagement in risky sexual behavior. Taken together, trends suggest that more programmatic initiatives and policies are needed to support this population in their transition back to society. Themes uncovered in our review also seem to justify attempts to understand the post-corrections transitions of FIBMs to and through college. While we know comparatively little about the post-corrections, postsecondary experiences of FIBMs, we know a good deal about Black men in higher education generally. This research is discussed in the next section.

What We Know about Black Men in College

Research on the experiences of Black males in higher education also reveals unsettling educational outcome patterns. While progress has been noted
in the number of Black students earning postsecondary degrees, significant attainment gaps remain (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). For example, gender disparities are largest and most pronounced among Black students when compared to all other racial/ethnic groups. Black males earn only one-third of all college degrees awarded to African Americans. In fact, less than a quarter of the Black male population in the United States has earned a postsecondary degree, compared to approximately 40% of the overall young adult population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

So much of what has been written about Black men in education generally and higher education specifically centers on deficits. Moving beyond deficit-centered perspectives of Black men, recent researchers have highlighted factors that are associated with academic and social success for Black men in college. Factors such as engagement (Flowers, 2004; Gufrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007), belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), psychosocial development (Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b), and even resistance to racial micro-aggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) have been deemed important for Black men at PWIs. For example, African American student organizations serve as agents of academic and social integration for Black students at PWIs (Gufrida, 2003) and can be particularly helpful in terms of promoting meaningful engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2007) and facilitating belonging in college (Strayhorn, 2012). Involvement can help Black men establish meaningful relationships with faculty and staff, which has been found to be important to academic achievement and persistence (Strayhorn, 2008a).

Connected to the previous line of inquiry, there are studies that also suggest important conclusions about the adjustment and psychosocial development of Black males in college (Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b). For instance, Strayhorn (2008b) analyzed data from 531 Black and White men who responded to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) and found that cross-racial interactions with peers significantly predicted a sense of belonging for Black men at PWIs. He concluded that White men, on average, reported higher levels of a sense of belonging than their African American counterparts.

Another line of inquiry focuses on Black identity expression and development, which includes issues of masculinity and sexuality. Through a series of interviews conducted with 32 African American male student leaders across 6 PWIs, two major findings related to the development of the participants’ Black identities (within the context of student organizations) were identified by Harper and Quaye (2007): (a) advancement of the African American community as an impetus for their leadership in the organization and (b) cross-cultural engagement and advocacy for oppressed people. They concluded that
student organizations help foster cross-cultural communication skills as well as care and advocacy for disadvantaged populations.

In sum, our review of the literature revealed a gap in existing knowledge. Scholars who study former inmates and correctional experiences focus on Black males in terms of their overrepresentation in the U.S. penal system and the impact post-corrections interventions play in easing their transition into employment and family settings, but do not examine the postsecondary educational experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men. Similarly, higher education scholars have devoted considerable attention to “the Black male crisis” in college and factors influencing their engagement and belonging, but have not, to date, studied subgroups of Black men who may face serious issues in college due to their correctional histories, namely FIBMs. This study provides an initial foray into the experiences of such men in hopes of filling this noticeable gap in the extant literature. Before discussing our methods, we explain the theory that framed our investigation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the importance of situation (i.e., context), support (i.e., resources), and self (i.e., background traits) to the experiences of Black males in society generally and former inmates specifically, we recognized the need for a framework that provided constructs for talking about such concepts. We chose Schlossberg’s (1989) Transition Theory for this purpose. The revised model posits a transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). Goodman et al. also note that type, context, and impact of the transition are crucial to understanding the meaning that it has for a particular individual at any given point in time.

The model identifies three types of transitions: anticipated, which are expected and predictable; unanticipated, which are neither expected nor predictable; and nonevents, which are expected but do not occur. Context, on the other hand, refers to either one’s own relationship to the transition or someone else’s and to the setting in which it takes place (e.g., college). Lastly, impact refers to the degree to which a transition changes or alters one’s daily life (Evans et al., 2009). The meanings attached to transitions, however, are subject to the individuals’ own perception of them (i.e., whether or not the individual sees them as positive or negative).

Apart from describing the essence of transition experiences, Schlossberg (1989) also provides a framework through which professionals can assess the readiness of clients to respond positively to life transitions. She does so by identifying
four factors (i.e., 4 S’s) that influence one’s ability to cope with a transition: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. An individual’s ability to cope with the transition is dependent on the resources he/she/z has in the aforementioned areas, which may explain “why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 57). Situation refers to factors that are associated with the trigger (i.e., what caused the transition), timing (i.e., whether it is considered timely), control (i.e., who controls it), role change, and duration (i.e., how long it lasts); prior experience with a similar transition and/or concurrent stress; and assessment of the transition. Self, on the other hand, encompasses the personal and demographic characteristics that affect how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, and age. Psychological resources are also a part of self, including one’s ego development, outlook, commitment, values, spirituality, and resilience. Support refers to the types of support available—intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities—and also has four functions: affect, affirmation, aid, and honest feedback. It can be measured by identifying stable or changing supports. Lastly, strategies fall into three categories: modify situation, control meaning, and manage stress in aftermath. Schlossberg’s theory has been historically used to better understand the transitions of nontraditional students who have undergone various types of changes in life (e.g., adult learners). As such, with its focus on situation, support, and self, as well as the language for discussing life transitions, such as moving to and through college after incarceration, we found Schlossberg’s model a useful heuristic for this analysis. Before presenting major findings from the study, we discuss our methods for data collection and analysis in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

A constructivist qualitative approach was employed in the present study. This approach was selected for several reasons, one of which is its epistemic underpinnings about the very nature of knowledge and how participants in a social setting construct multiple realities (Glesne, 2006). Furthermore, this approach has congruent positioning with our own ethics and values as researchers (e.g., that knowledge is socially constructed; that truth is subjective and known in part, if ever) and allowed us to give voice to a largely invisible group of students without causing harm to their authentic voice (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling approach (Merriam, 1998). “The logic and power of purposeful sampling... leads to selecting
information-rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 46). Specifically, we worked with campus administrators at multiple public, research universities to identify and recruit an initial pool of prospective participants—individuals who met the sampling criteria. To qualify for the study, participants had to (a) identify as African American or Black and male, (b) be enrolled full-time at one of the participating universities, and (c) have been incarcerated prior to or since college entry for a minimum of 24 hours. All prospective participants were asked to share their email addresses with the principal investigator, who contacted them and shared more information about the study.

All initial prospects (n = 2) agreed to be interviewed. As the research evolved, additional participants were identified and invited to participate in the study using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), wherein existing participants were asked to recommend the study to other formerly incarcerated Black men at their institution with whom they were familiar. Participant recruitment is on-going, as we seek to identify additional “cases of interest from people who know people who know people who know what cases are information rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview subjects” (Patton, 2002, p. 182). Table 1 presents a descriptive summary of participants.

### Table 1

Demographic description of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time Incarcerated</th>
<th>When Incarcerated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
<td>While in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>While in college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews over a 12-month period. The purpose of interviewing is to “find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 1990, p. 278). The interview protocol consisted of 8 questions/prompts to elicit stories from each participant about his academic and social experiences prior to college entry, experiences in the correctional system, and the nature and intensity of his adjustment and transition to college. For example, “Tell me about your experience being incarcerated. Feel free to share what led to being incarcerated, your experiences in a correctional
facility, and what memories you hold.” Interviews, on average, lasted approximately 50 minutes, although they ranged from 45 to 65 minutes. Interview length varied across participants because some needed more time than others to recall past experiences, to convey their feelings through spoken words, and to work through emotions (e.g., crying, frustration) that were evoked as they responded to our questions. As in our previous work, interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Several steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness and ensure accuracy of data.

To recruit participants for interviews, we interacted with gatekeepers who worked with FIBMs. Gatekeepers were directors or staff members of reentry programs that often provided monetary, personal, and social forms of support to FIBMs. Though program locations and missions varied, our approach remained the same. Staff members contacted potential participants and then, with their permission, passed along email and phone contact information to the researchers. After explaining the purpose of the study and addressing any additional questions, comments, or concerns, researchers scheduled interviews at the convenience of the participants. Additionally, word of mouth and flyers on social media sites were used to encourage participation in the study.

To ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of data, we employed Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) methods of maintaining rigor and accuracy in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A naturalistic approach was deemed necessary due to the lack of current research on the transition and adjustment of FIBMs in higher education. Credibility was assured through member checks and study participants were contacted with preliminary results, including a priori descriptions of themes. Utilizing peer debriefing with three individuals who have knowledge about the intersection of ex-offender status and Black male identity or qualitative research generally also added to the credibility of findings and trustworthiness of our design. Providing thick rich descriptions of the participants and sites of data collection supported transferability. Lastly, dependability and confirmability were maintained through prolonged engagement in the field; this included observation of program sessions, ceremonies, and multiple observations (i.e., shadowing) of participant’s daily activities to understand a “day in the life” of a FIBM in higher education.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed in three stages using the constant comparison method described by Strauss and his colleagues (e.g., Strauss, 1995). First, transcripts were read to generate initial categories of information or codes; this is known as open coding. Next, codes were collapsed by grouping categories
that seemed to relate to each other while leaving intact those that stood independent from all others. This smaller list of categories was used to generate “supercodes,” or preliminary themes. Lastly, themes were compared and contrasted to understand the degree to which they were similar; closely related themes were collapsed or renamed so that the name represented the sum of its parts. This iterative process was repeated until no new codes or themes were found—a point called saturation in the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The next section presents our major findings of the study.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Three key findings were identified from the iterative, data analysis process described above. First, participants discussed their ex-offender label as an obstacle as well as a motivation in transitioning and adjusting successfully to higher education. Second, they explained the importance of supportive networks in navigating their transition and adjustment to college, specifically how the presence (or absence) of various forms of support (i.e., institutional, familial, and mentorship) both aided and challenged their persistence in college. Finally, participants described the role that resiliency—which was derived or drawn from varied sources (e.g., incarceration experience, stigmas, family, intrapersonal) and is defined as one’s ability to persist despite challenges (Gordon, 1993)—played in helping them to overcome challenges experienced during college. Conceptually, resilience is related to but distinct from Strayhorn’s (2013) use of grit with Black male collegians, which will be discussed later. Findings from the present study are presented below using direct quotes from participants, where possible, to illustrate the meaning and significance of each theme.

Ex-Offender” Label as Impediment and Motivation

The participants in the study spoke at length about being labeled as an “ex-offender.” Socially, the ex-offender label posed serious problems for FIBMs in college, which negatively affected some peer interactions, limited options for campus involvement, and all-too-often shaped faculty members’ perceptions of the students. For example, participants shared how the label was often associated with stereotypes (e.g., that they’re hardened criminals or murderers, regardless of the actual offense), encouraged racial micro-aggressions (e.g., staff saying, “Oh, well, it’s expected of Black men”), and sustained low expectations among faculty/staff, and even peers, that ultimately marginalized them on campus.

While generally viewed as an impediment to one’s success in college, the ex-offender label also stimulated the educational ambitions of FIBMs, serving
consciously or subconsciously as motivation for them to complete their degrees. For instance, Tony, a 25-year-old recent college graduate, shared his thoughts about being labeled as an ex-offender:

People are telling me [that] I’m a convict and you’re this, you’re a criminal and this, that, and the other. Whole time I’m thinking yeah I might be those things... but I am going to be all that with a [college] degree because you can’t do anything without a degree....

Tony’s comments illuminate the complexity of participants’ experiences as ex-offenders in college. On the one hand, FIBM are verbally assaulted by the use of pejorative labels such as “convict,” “criminal,” “rule-breaker,” “jail bird,” and the like, which can undermine their academic motivation and alienate them socially. However, on the other, our participants also talked at length about how they converted negative labels and messages (e.g., “criminals don’t graduate”) into fuel for pursuing their academic goals. Consider this comment made by Keith:

You have to keep pushin’ [sic], you have to keep fightin’ [sic], you can never give up... you can’t let this thing [i.e., ex-offender status] hinder you. You wanna [sic] do some things that you can look back on and be proud of.... You have to move forward because if you don’t you’ll be in the same situation that you were before [referring to possible reentry or repeat offense].

Verbal assaults of negative labels affected the academic and social experiences of FIBM in the study, but so too did the actual status of being an ex-offender or formerly incarcerated Black male college student. For example, all participants spoke about difficulties faced while transitioning to college after their release from jail. Keith, a college graduate contemplating graduate studies, shared the following that captured the essence of this point:

Now it’s like everything is different, now [that] I am an ex-offender, so now it’s... the transformation is significant, it is overwhelming at times... [but] you have to find other ways around it [or] you have to learn how to make it better.

“Making it better” or striving to improve one’s life after incarceration was a common goal across participants, although their attempts were not without many setbacks, due to their ex-offender status. For example, after leaving jail, Keith struggled to find independent housing even though he had the money to afford monthly rent; many landlords denied his application or turned him down before he even applied based on his ex-offender status. He was forced to live in costly motels while attending school, moving quite frequently from one...
to the next, all of which affected his adjustment to and transition through college. Reflective of a larger theme to come (i.e., resiliency), Keith admitted that his situation was “less than ideal,” but offered these words that suggest his positive outlook on life: “I was blessed. I had some money when I came home, I didn’t come home broke… so I knew I could make it somehow.”

There were other examples of how participants’ status as an ex-offender negatively influenced their academic experiences. For example, Tony shared his experience trying to transfer to another institution to complete his bachelor’s degree:

When you have this stuff [i.e., status or label] on you, when you have a felony, when you’re in this situation you gotta [sic] realize a lot of people are gonna [sic] turn you down, [or] turn you away. Turn they [sic] nose up at you… a lot of people are going to say “no.” That’s what happened when I tried to transfer schools. They just saw felon and hit deny… no questions.

Tony’s comments reveal how some people on campus—that is, faculty, staff, and peers—feel about formerly incarcerated individuals, ex-offenders, or felons enrolled in college. Campus staff and peers may turn a student down, reject him outright, or “just say no” without consideration of his academic credentials, abilities, or professional promise. Participants shared how negative labels such as ex-offender or felon engender stereotypes that set people’s expectations, which in turn drive behaviors or decisions—some of which (e.g., denying an application) are made without additional information.

Obstacles aside, study participants agreed that negative labels and pejorative terms can be intimidating (i.e., some feared living up to these negative images), frustrating, and threatening when navigating academic processes and procedures, such as course registration, housing selection, or even joining a club or fraternity. Despite fears and setbacks, FIBMs in our study worked hard to overcome these challenges in hopes of securing a better life marked by upward social mobility, civil freedoms, and “fair chances” at living free without reentry into the correctional system. Our participants spoke explicitly about resisting stereotypes—that is, proving negative stereotypes about them wrong by failing to embody or behave in ways that affirm such labels. Trying to overcome obstacles, bounce back from setbacks, or adjust to college required supportive social networks comprised of individuals both on- and off-campus, another major theme of the study.

**Importance of Supportive Social Networks**

FIBMs in the study stressed the importance of supportive social networks in navigating their adjustment to and transition through college. For instance, Tony explained that he needed supportive networks while in school:
I sorta [sic], you don’t have anybody to turn to for this help like, though you need it—I’m trying to figure out my way in life as me having been locked up before, you know…. But at the same time I’m trying to do the best as possible. I don’t have anyone to guide me necessarily... so I really need help.

While participants agreed generally that they needed supportive social networks in college, the kind of help they needed was far from general and included unique forms of advice, information, or guidance. For example, participants struggled to “figure out [their] way in life,” quoting Tony, as formerly incarcerated Black male collegians. Supportive relations with faculty, staff, students, or off-campus agencies seemed helpful, but few in number when making decisions about disclosing information on student financial aid forms or even about applying for aid in general. Supportive relations were deemed critical by participants when talking with faculty about court visits that conflicted with class meetings and seeking medical care on- or off-campus, such as HIV and sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing. Without supportive relationships, FIBMs in our sample were forced to “go it alone,” quoting Keith, often concealing information that may have placed them at-risk for academic dismissal or untreated infection.

Lacking supportive social networks was, in part, reflective of the larger campus environment toward former inmates, ex-offenders, or FIBMs in our study. For instance, Tony invoked strong language to describe how he was treated at his first undergraduate institution after his release from jail: “The other institution treated you like shit... [like] you can’t make a mistake, [or else] now you’re not human....” Participants used words or phrases that imply a sense of social alienation or marginalization on campus as a result of being a FIBM—phrases ranged from “worst experience of my life” to “they exiled me,” from “they cut me off” to “I was the only... and I was alone.” Keith summed it up best when he said, “They labeled me as an ex-offender and they left me be... as if that’s all I could ever be [there].”

When participants did establish meaningful supportive social networks and positive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, such encouragements positively affected their college experience, ultimately aiding in their persistence. Keith, for instance, shared how his family supported him while incarcerated: “I had a lot of people come to my support... everyone in my family stayed in my corner. Like my moms contacted my professors for me, talked to my advisor about enrollment stuff, and my college-educated brother came to teach me [laughing] while I was locked up.” Not all participants necessarily received family support, although they all agree that it is important to adjusting successfully in college as a FIBM. Without
family support, students shoulder enormous responsibility for their academic, social, and financial well-being, both presently and in the future.

In addition to stressing the need for family encouragement, participants also talked about the role staff support and faculty mentorship played in helping them transition to or adjust (back) to college life. Consider the following comment from Tony that captures the essence of several others:

My mentor, yeah my mentor that came from that school is... well she, she was always on my back! Coming down to my apartment at college making sure “You good, you got anything going on? How is your finances? How are you?” You know that is the type of stuff that matters. Everybody goes to school and I mean... because of that personal effect, I could do it. You don’t want to get lost in the shuffle, you just don’t want to be a number... you want to be known, you know, as an individual not a stereotype.

Supportive relationships with campus staff and faculty mentors, like Tony’s, were deemed critically important for the academic and social success of FIBMs in the present study. Frequent and intrusive behaviors by those with good intentions seemed to signal care and concern for FIBMs, pushed them to work harder than usual to meet professors’ expectations or affirmed their acceptance as individuals worthy of dignity and respect. Here’s another example of what participants gained from supportive relationships with faculty or professional mentors:

[My mentor] believed in me... she knew about me beforehand and she wasn’t going to let that stop her from giving me opportunities and I respect that. It ain’t like she was giving me freebies or nothing... she was hard and she was direct about my struggle being an ex-offender. But I didn’t let that stop me... since it didn’t seem to stop her.

In sum, participants stressed the role of supportive social networks in aiding in their successful transition or adjustment back to college after incarceration. They identified devoted family members, supportive mentors, and understanding peers as factors related to their academic and social success. By identifying and establishing supportive social networks while in college, FIBMs were able to manage responsibilities on campus while in jail or court, establish new or rejoin existing social groups or clubs, and believe in themselves again despite their “record” in the correctional system. Related to believing in themselves again, FIBMs described the role that resiliency—the ability to bounce back from setbacks—played in their adjustment and transition to college.
Importance of Resiliency and “Grit”

If participants agreed on anything, it was that transitioning or adjusting back to college after incarceration was challenging, difficult, and “not for the faint in heart,” to quote a student. Indeed, FIBMs with whom we spoke encountered many barriers, hurdles, and setbacks when adjusting to transitioning to college. For instance, participants struggled to find adequate housing options after being denied by several local landlords, housing projects, and individual agents due to their correctional status (e.g., ex-offender, felon). Other barriers included lack of access to health care, restricted employment options, and even missed classes or assignments that conflicted with mandatory court appearances, required community service hours, or time spent in jail.

To overcome these setbacks, participants seemed to draw on an inner strength, determination, or, what one called, “a sixth sense” to persist in the face of obstacles—what scholars typically refer to as resiliency. Resiliency is defined as one’s ability to achieve positive outcomes and avoid maladaptive ones under significantly adverse or negative conditions (Rutter, 1993; Strayhorn, 2010a; Wilson-Sadberry, 1991). Although it is likely to flow from many different sources, our participants pointed to specific experiences growing up that nurtured their resiliency, such as watching hard-working parents (or guardians) make sacrifices for the family or knowing a loved one who lived a productive life after incarceration without ever re-entering the justice system. It was this sense of resilience—a drive to achieve despite negative correctional experiences—that helped them to overcome the challenges of being formerly incarcerated Black male collegians. Consider the following:

Growing up how I did that whole strict parents thing and performance based like you’re supposed to do these things and that was instilled in me. So not graduating college was never an option, I guess, even despite my situation [i.e., being locked up]. I was gonna [sic] do that no matter what… I had to go through that to get through all that, you know. It was like, if you’re not even [laughter], you’re not even gonna [sic] have a chance of being successful, unless you finish college, so it was never about not finishing college… that’s all... what they would say is water under the bridge, because I was gonna [sic] finish college you know… no matter what. It didn’t matter if um, how much trouble I got in or whatever happened. I had to finish college by just getting up and doing it for myself. (Tony)

I had to finish college... that’s the most important part. It is not an easy path and I essentially ended up getting my bachelor’s degree, which is... honestly I can say on this interview... it doesn’t mean anything. I got it. It’s a piece of paper. But to me it means so much more [laughing]. Because I know what I went through to get it. I know what I had to overcome on my own to get it, you know. I had to work my ass off. It’s easy for some, but it
was hard to get mine, so it means a lot more than that paper even though it’s just paper... it means more to me. (Keith)

Taken together, participants’ comments clearly suggest the important role that resilience played in the college adjustment and transition experiences of FIBMs. Given the numerous barriers and setbacks to their success in college, participants often had to draw on an internal resource or motivation to succeed despite the many risk factors they faced as formerly incarcerated men of color in college. Resilience served as the fuel that enabled them to try again, stay the course, or believe in a positive outcome while facing multiple adverse decisions.

Not only did participants point to vicarious experiences “growing up” that nurtured their resiliency (e.g., watching others endure), but they also highlighted internally derived motivations that enabled them to adjust or transition successfully in college. Notice the nature of resilience in the following excerpt:

Like straight up, there is [sic] no other words I can say. I really really really really had to want it for myself. There were so many opportunities that I could have quit and I had a lot of good excuses why I should have. I could have went and done other things and took other paths, but they probably would’ve put me back on the block, you know. Naw [sic] see, I stuck with it and I got that degree... nobody will be able to take that away from me. (Keith)

Internal motivation and personal passion for one’s goals, which is related to Strayhorn’s (2013) notion of grit for Black male collegians, helped FIBMs in this study resist vulnerabilities to quit college, forced them to stay focused on degree commitments, and aided them in making meaning of their adjustment issues in college. Indeed, resilience helped them bounce back, move through, and overcome obstacles to their success in college.

In sum, FIBMs stressed the importance of resiliency in their transition and adjustment back to college. By reflecting on their early life experiences, FIBMs pointed to several sources of resiliency, including role models, sacrificing parents (or guardians), and even internal determined motivation. All in all, resilience was identified as a supportive factor for overcoming the challenges associated with being a formerly incarcerated Black male collegian at a PWI. In the next section, we discuss these findings in the context of previous literature and highlight implications for policy, practice, and research.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to understand the adjustment and transition experiences of FIBMs at PWIs. More specifically, we sought to understand FIBMs’
adjustment and transition challenges as well as supports that enable their persistence in college. Several major conclusions can be drawn from this important study: transition and adjustment posed challenges for participants, resiliency played an important role in persistence, being labeled influenced their experiences in college both negatively and positively, and findings support previous work undertaken by Goodman et al. (2006) around coping with change.

First, participants in the study struggled significantly with transitioning and adjusting to college life after being incarcerated. Participants reported clear feelings of social alienation and marginalization on entry (back) into school and it was difficult to find adequate support or assistance on-campus for formerly incarcerated students specifically. Most were forced to find services off-campus or through social service organizations. Other forms of support ranged from family members to supportive staff, nurturing faculty, and understanding peers. While we uncovered no prior studies on the post-correctional educational experiences of Black male collegians, these findings are generally consistent with previous work on reentry and other social service programs (Freudenberg et al., 2010). Like previous authors, we found that many formerly incarcerated people—including FIBMs—turn to such programs and services for help and alternatives to recidivism.

Second, the interview data suggested that resiliency is a strategy employed by FIBMs to help them persist to degree completion. This is consistent with scholars who have highlighted ways that Black males in college are able to resist stereotypes, low expectations, and discrimination against them while, in turn, persisting (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Jenkins, 2006). Participants discussed their passion for education and its impact on their desire to complete their degrees. Additionally, they talked at length about their childhood upbringing; specifically about how the struggles they endured prepared them for the challenges they faced both during and after their incarceration. This, in turn, strengthened their resolve to finish, as they saw no other options toward self-redemption, while also dispelling common conceptions about the abilities of FIBMs. In addition, intrinsic motivation was another source of FIBMs’ resiliency.

Third, the label of “ex-offender” influenced the experience of FIBMs within this study both negatively and positively. First, results demonstrate how damaging and troubling the label can be for FIBMs. Recall how participants discussed its negative impact on their peer interactions as well their options for campus involvement. While the literature on FIBMs is virtually nonexistent, there is a fairly elaborate research base on the power and influence of negative words, labels, and stereotypes on Black males’ self-perceptions and behaviors (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).
Steele (1997) argued that stereotypes negatively impact the academic performance of women and African Americans, which leads to dis-identification with school. Our findings are generally consistent with these points, but further clarify the ways in which labels such as ex-con or jail-bird negatively affect the academic and social experiences of FIBMs.

Secondly, while the social ramifications of the negative labels associated with FIBMs (namely, “ex-offender”) posed challenges in their adjustment and transition to college, it also fueled their educational ambitions. Recall how participants in the study discussed their desire to persist in spite of their incarceration experience. One specifically discussed how the label of “ex-offender” motivated him to finish his degree because he recognized his potential was greater than the label allowed. This finding is consistent with a line of inquiry that highlights the ways in which Black males in college resist negative stereotypes placed on them by others (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2009). Yet, this study extends what is known by cataloging the various ways in which FIBMs resist negative stereotypes in college, the meaning they make of such stereotypes, and the purpose they assign to this process.

Consistent with Schlossberg’s (1989) transition theory, individuals’ ability to cope with life transitions is a function of the situation, self, strategies, and supports available at the time of change. “Unexpected transitions,” like going to jail, can be particularly difficult since they are rarely events that one can anticipate nor are they experienced in one’s daily life. Our participants also stressed the important role that supportive social relationships played in their adjustment and transition. For instance, recall how the support of family, mentors, and staff and faculty at the institutions enabled FIBMs to overcome arduous challenges associated with their experience. More specifically, they developed networks of support that provided emotional encouragement, extrinsic motivation, resources, and affirmations that aided in their persistence. Findings lend credence to studies that have highlighted the importance of supportive relationships for college students in higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996; Tinto, 1993) and for Black male collegians (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b), but significantly expand what is known about the unique challenges of FIBMs in college and the support necessary to retain them.

Lastly, the study’s findings provide support for the four factors identified (i.e., situation, self, support, strategies) by Goodman et al. (2006) that assist individuals in coping with transition. As demonstrated, one’s ability to cope with a transition is dependent on the resources he has within those areas. Participants in our study experienced multiple major transitions: incarceration, removal from school, and returning to school. When considered together, the impact of any single transition
is multiplied by others, requiring the individual to not only seek out supportive networks to help cope, but also to assess the situation, reflect on one’s self, and employ strategies (e.g., resiliency) to negotiate the transition. Our study lends persuasive support for these theoretical hypotheses. Given the personal experiences of the participants growing up, the impact of the transition was different for each of them. FIBMs, however, were able to translate their challenges as children and young adults into strategies to resist and bounce back from adversity, despite their present circumstances. These findings have important implications for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that will be discussed in the next section.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have implications for future practice. Quotes from students in this study illuminate the importance of support networks in the persistence of FIBMs to college degree attainment, ultimately increasing their sense of connectedness to the institution. Based on these findings, higher education instructors and practitioners must acknowledge the important role of mentors, student organizations, and campus resources in facilitating the successful adjustment and transition of FIBMs to college. More specifically, educators and practitioners should ensure that FIBMs are well aware of the resources available to them, on- and off-campus, as they transition to college. Professionals should work to identify mentors and supportive organizations that can help FIBMs while in college. Reentry specialists and student support professionals should be more intentional in providing programming for FIBMs on navigating their experiences in higher education.

Findings from the present study also have implications for future research and theory. Our data reveal insights on the “ex-offender” label and its relationship with the educational aspirations of FIBMs. In many ways, the fear of living up to the label provided internal motivation for participants to succeed in college, which ultimately strengthened their passion for higher education. Much more information is needed, however, and future research on FIBMs should examine the ways in which such students identify supportive networks as well as the factors associated with their development of resiliency in college. For instance, quantitative researchers might deploy national surveys to FIBMs eliciting information about their pre-college decisions, criminal histories, and sources of support in college and qualitative researchers might use case study or narrative inquiry to document the lived experiences of FIBMs in college.

Lastly, findings from this study have major federal policy implications in the United States. As noted earlier, while African American men make up close to 50%
of the prison population, only 4% are enrolled in college. Presently, federal programs geared toward ex-offenders focus primarily on occupational and vocational training rather than higher education. Given the disproportionate over-representation of Black males in prison and their underrepresentation in college, there exists an opportunity for policymakers to strengthen the prison-to-college pipeline. Thus, policymakers should reconsider existing policies and practices that prevent the enrollment of “ex-offenders” in college or relegate them to second-class citizenship, such as restrictions on eligibility for federal assistance for higher education expenses for certain periods. Similarly, federal and state policymakers might implement new policies that secure health care and housing provisions for exonerated Black men transitioning from prison to college. All of these steps, and more, hold promise for improving the educational experiences of FIBMs and achieving our national degree completion goals.

CONCLUSION

This study extends our understanding of an often-overlooked population in higher education, formerly incarcerated Black male collegians. More specifically, it enhances our understanding of their adjustment and transition experiences as well as the factors associated with their successful navigation of college post-incarceration. Studies like this are crucial to learning more about the educational experiences of FIBMs and subsequently strengthening their outcomes, as their experiences differ from those of any other group of students. This population demands our collective attention, as education is the most direct pathway to economic and social mobility in America. Indeed, there is a moral and social justice imperative to better understand their challenges; dismantling policies and practices that systematically relegate them to the lower echelons of society.

NOTES

1. The terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript, referring to individuals who trace their ancestral origins to groups of the African diaspora, including West Indians, Africans, Caribbeans, and Haitians, to name a few.

2. Male refers to one’s sex or biological assignment at birth to avoid conflating issues of sex with gender, gender performance, or sexuality, in keeping with the current literature (Butler, 2004).

3. We chose this threshold since 24 hours is both the maximum time that officers can hold a person in jail without evidence of an arrestable offense and the minimum amount of time typically required for an arrest to show-up on one’s criminal record in most states.
REFERENCES


