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## A Study on Formerly Incarcerated Women From Appalachia Pursuing Higher Education

Marcie Simms  
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A STUDY ON FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN FROM APPALACHIA PURSUING  
HIGHER EDUCATION

A dissertation submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

In  
Leadership Studies  
by

Marcie Simms

Approved by

Dr. Dennis M. Anderson, Committee Chairperson

Dr. Charles Bethel

Dr. Edna Meisel

Marshall University  
May 2022

## APPROVAL OF DISSERTATION

We, the faculty supervising the work of **Marcie Hatfield Simms**, affirm that the dissertation, **A Study on Formerly Incarcerated Women from Appalachia Pursuing Higher Education** meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the EdD Program in **Leadership Studies** and the College of Education and Professional Development. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

<u>Dr. Dennis M. Anderson</u> Leadership Studies	<u><i>Dennis Anderson</i></u> <small>Dennis Anderson (Dec 16, 2021 12:52 EST)</small> Committee Chairperson Major	<u>12/16/2021</u> Date
<u>Dr. Charles Bethel</u> Leadership Studies	<u><i>Charles Bethel</i></u> <small>Charles Bethel (Dec 16, 2021 12:57 EST)</small> Committee Member Major	<u>12/16/2021</u> Date
<u>Dr. Edna Meisel</u> External	<u><i>Edna Meisel</i></u> <small>Edna Meisel (Dec 17, 2021 13:42 EST)</small> Committee Member External	<u>12/16/2021</u> Date

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to the strong women in my life. They have supported me and pushed me through my years of education. My grandmother, who was my biggest bragger, quit school at 13 to financially support her family and received her GED at the age of 60. My mother, who has been an educator at church and as a teacher's aide for 30 years, has always encouraged me and showed me what it means to accomplish your goals through hard work and dedication. I dedicate this dissertation to the women in my office who have heard my frustrations, told me I could do it, mothered my children, and decided to follow in my footsteps. And lastly, I dedicate this to the women who trusted me with their stories.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must first acknowledge my husband Jason and my children, Sawyer and Scarlet. My husband was the first to tell me I needed to continue this educational journey. He has taken over the dinner duties and most of the laundry duties. My children have grown up in the last three years and sacrificed time with me, but I hope they see the benefits of the work. I have read coursework while watching their basketball and football games, and they never questioned my commitment to them.

I also would be remiss if I did not mention my father. I am a first-generation college student, but I was born to parents who value education. Since I was five years old, my father has told my sister and me that we would go to college. His goal was for us to have it better than he and my mom, and he acknowledged this goal was attainable through education. To say he is proud is an understatement, and I continually tell him to quit bragging to his friends and family members.

I also wish to acknowledge my classmates, coworkers, and my dissertation writing buddies, Nikki, and Jennifer. I am not sure I could have done it without your support and laughs.

Lastly, I could not complete this dissertation without acknowledging the women who participated in this study. You trusted me to hear and tell your stories, and my hope is something good comes from this study, and you continue to be strong.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The pursuit of higher education is a goal that is embedded in secondary education and often correlated with the American dream. This study concentrated on the barriers that women with a felony conviction face when pursuing higher education after incarceration. Based on the identified barriers, current best practices for admission to higher education institutions and individual resources available for the ex-offender population were assessed. Using a questionnaire and interviews, a qualitative research approach helped identify the barriers that women with a felony conviction face when pursuing education and best practice solutions for institutions of higher education when working with the felony population. The study revealed inconsistencies and a lack of best practices for admission policies when institutions of higher education include a criminal background question on the admission application. The interview participants indicated multiple barriers that exist for women who are pursuing higher education.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Ex-offenders with felony convictions represent a large population in the United States due to the opioid crisis that has spread across the country. The United States has the world's largest prison population (Meiners, 2020). In 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice reported 6,613,500 individuals were incarcerated, on parole, or on probation in the United States (Carson, 2020). Of these individuals, 43% of released prisoners will reenter the prison system. The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Bureau for Research and Evaluation reported the female prison population increased 60% from 2000 to 2015 (Austin et al., 2018). The number of female inmates convicted for drug offenses during this time was double the rate of male inmates (Austin et al., 2018). According to the U.S Department of Justice (Carson, 2018), there were 110,845 women incarcerated under federal or state jurisdiction, and of that number, 4,278 were in an Ohio facility.

This study examined if barriers to higher education for female ex-offenders have been created by society, lawmakers, intersectionality, the Appalachian culture, or institutions of higher education. The researcher studied admission policies, support programs in higher education, and completion rates for formerly incarcerated women pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region. The study used a qualitative approach with input from higher education administrators, mental health practitioners, and women with felony convictions from the Appalachian region.

### **Background**

The release from incarceration presents separate challenges for women compared to men. Incarcerated women are more likely to be women of color, in their 30s, convicted of a nonviolent drug offense, from fragmented families, victims of child abuse, single mothers, have a GED education, and have sporadic work histories (Davidson & Chesney-Lind, 2009). Many women

are mothers when they enter incarceration, so when they are released, they are responsible for childcare and financially supporting their children. Women are more likely than men to face limited support for substance abuse and mental health counseling coupled with a lack of housing options and daycare (Pollack, 2009). The criminal justice system has used men's experiences to develop reentry pathways for women, but there has been a lack of knowledge and practice for women reentering their communities after incarceration (Wesely & Dewey, 2018). After individuals are released from prison, they enter a punitive and complex landscape and experience discrimination and a lack of privacy (Meiners, 2020).

A felony conviction can have a lasting effect by following individuals for the rest of their lives. A felony conviction increases difficulties in finding a job, securing housing, and obtaining an education (Nguyen, 2015). As the population continues to increase for individuals with a felony conviction, conversations between institutions of higher education and state and federal policymakers are necessary to address recidivism and improve educational opportunities for ex-felons, especially women.

Historically, the criminal justice system has labeled crimes as nonviolent and violent. Drugs, property damage, and disorderly conduct are examples of nonviolent crimes. The most common nonviolent offenses involve drug trafficking, drug possession, burglary, and larceny (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004). Nonviolent arrests, due to the opioid crisis, have increased in rural areas where many smaller institutions of higher education are located (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014). This increase in incarcerations for nonviolent offenses has especially been true for the Appalachian region.

The opioid crisis has significantly affected the Appalachian region of the United States. A report published by the National Center for Health Statistics reported that in 2017, four states

within the Appalachian region had the highest opioid drug overdose rates in the country. The states were West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania (Beatty et al., 2019).

As a result, Appalachian lawmakers have been working with individuals to transition ex-offenders back into society successfully (Hazlett, 2018). Most individuals leave prison with limited opportunities, education, or job skills (Radcliffe & Hunter, 2016). Ex-felons are turning to higher education as a means of job placement and financial stability. Education post incarceration can produce a “hook for change” (Runell, 2017, p. 901) and personal growth for individuals previously incarcerated. Enrollment teams from institutions of higher education are the first stop for potential students, and some institutions include a criminal history question on the admission application. The criminal background question can deter individuals with a felony from completing the application if they expect a negative response. The deterrence in pursuing an education creates a roadblock in the educational path for the ex-offender.

Appalachia's rural areas have not been immune to increased incarcerations for nonviolent drug offenses. In the rural Appalachian areas, services and employment have declined, and education has been the only hope for many of the women who live in these areas with their families (Hazlett, 2018). Communities like Portsmouth, OH, widely associated with the opioid crisis, have been used as a model for the decline in industry and an increase in prescription pain clinics, commonly referred to as pill mills. Portsmouth was once known as an industrial giant due to natural resources and the Ohio River, but by the 1980s, many of the industrial jobs disappeared when the Armco Steel plant closed, and 1,300 people lost their jobs (Shuler, 2017).

The drug problem has been compounded by poverty, lack of education, and a decline in job availability. These problems existed before the drug crisis and have created a crisis with no end. In 2000, the poverty rate for Scioto County, OH, the county in which Portsmouth resides,

was 18.5% and jumped to 27.2% by 2014 (Shuler, 2017). By 2010, Scioto County doctors had prescribed 9.7 million doses of opiates, and in 2011, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) shut down pill mills but did not solve the addiction problem (Shuler, 2017). After the public health emergency was declared, the pill mills closed and permits were not issued for new ones. After community pill mills closed, many individuals addicted to the pills then started using other drugs such as heroin.

In 2010, the Portsmouth Health Commissioner was the first to declare a public health emergency due to the use of opioids and overdoses (Welsh-Huggins, 2010). The public health emergency was primarily due to the local pill mills located in the Portsmouth area. The DEA considered Scioto County to be one of the worst places in the country for prescription painkiller abuse based on the number of people abusing pills per capita (Welsh-Huggins, 2010). The increase in illegal drug use increased the number of arrests related to illegal drug use and distribution. In the past five years, the Portsmouth, OH, court system has created a drug court that uses a recovery approach. Incarcerated individuals have been able to obtain their GED and take college courses while imprisoned. If an ex-felon does not take advantage of those educational opportunities, they discover soon after their release that life has changed due to their felony conviction, and employment is difficult to secure. Therefore, education and job training opportunities are more critical than ever before, so ex-felons often seek out educational opportunities in an effort to obtain employment (Hazlett, 2018).

Reentry to society and education can be difficult for all incarcerated individuals, but reentry for women into society is especially difficult. After incarceration, women may require more support within the prison system and after release (Clone & DeHart, 2014). According to the Ohio Bureau of Justice Statistics, women in the state prison system reported higher drug

abuse after incarceration compared to men (Snodgrass et al., 2017). The increase in drug abuse could be due to the lack of social support the women receive at reentry to society. Women represent the fastest-growing population for incarcerated individuals in the United States. The percentage of women incarcerated increased from 8,000 to 110,000 from 1970 to 2015 (Bain, 2018). Incarcerated women who reenter society represent a population that deserves further research to determine support needs to increase opportunities and decrease recidivism.

The increase of women being incarcerated has been slowly rising due to legislation, and continues to be a topic of discussion for legislatures and politicians. The passage of the Controlled Substance Act of 1970 contributed to the increase in incarcerations for women for nonviolent drug offenses until the Fair Sentencing Act (FSA) passage in 2010 (Lloyd, 2015). The opioid crisis in Appalachian communities has caused an increase in nonviolent drug convictions and created a problem for the United States and small Appalachian communities. Education is a pathway to make positive changes for women and the Appalachian region. The choice to pursue an education should be an opportunity for all women, even women with a felony conviction.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There has been limited research on male and female ex-offenders pursuing higher education, and the lack of research for ex-offenders has been especially true for rural Appalachian regions (Brackenridge, 1999). Historically, mass incarceration has produced racial and socioeconomic disparities across the United States (Ristroph, 2019). The collection of data and studies for women and men in prison did not start until the late 1970s, but less is known about women's incarceration, recidivism, and reentry struggles (Parker, 2009). Criminal justice system practices during and after incarceration are based on the needs of men, not women (Snodgrass et al., 2017).



The higher education system was created based on the needs and experiences of 18- to 22-year-old students. The average age of students entering higher education has increased while the higher education system has remained the same (Green, 2013). The higher education system is not designed for a student who has a felony conviction, is a parent, and has limited financial resources (Kearney et al., 2018). Additionally, the increase of individuals with a felony conviction in the higher education system is taboo; the subject is often overlooked, not discussed, and presents challenges requiring additional financial and academic support for this underrepresented population.

As ex-offenders apply to colleges and universities, conversations about admission processes and support are needed. Female ex-offenders are a high-risk student population (Parker, 2009). To assist ex-offenders with graduation completion, higher education institutions need to identify if barriers to education exist in their institutional practices, admission policies, and available resources.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify if barriers exist for women with a felony conviction when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region. The opioid crisis has plagued the Appalachian area, and female incarceration rates have increased for nonviolent drug convictions (Snodgrass et al., 2017). Recidivism and unemployment are costs to society that will continue to rise unless changes occur and post incarceration barriers are examined and understood. According to a study at the Ohio State University, total costs to individuals and the state for treatment, criminal justice, and lost productivity were between \$2.8 billion and \$5 billion in 2015 (Shuler, 2018). Barriers to reentry contribute to the overall size of the prison population and affect all communities and individuals. The probability of recidivism is

approximately 70% in 3 years after an ex-offender is released from incarceration (Smith & Hattery, 2011).

Smith and Hattery's (2011) study identified core reentry barriers for ex-offenders. These barriers included employment opportunities, housing access, and employment bans. Securing employment and housing are connected. You cannot have one without the other (Smith & Hattery, 2011). To get a job, you need a permanent address, and in order to get housing you need a job. A felony conviction often disqualifies the job applicant, or the applicant does not get a call back for an interview. White men with a felony conviction are more likely to receive an interview than African Americans and women (Smith & Hattery, 2011).

Family and society compound the barriers for Appalachian women created by the Appalachian cultures, opioid crisis, and socioeconomic decline (Hazlett, 2018). When women from Appalachia pursue higher education, they depart from social norms and family expectations (Egan, 1993). The expectation of being a parent and taking care of the family is common for women from Appalachia, and women with a felony conviction are not immune to these social norms and expectations.

Institutions of higher education will need to identify ways to help the ex-offender women from Appalachia as they seek to better themselves through postsecondary programs. The campus resources include mental health counseling, financial aid, and childcare assistance. Students with a felony conviction have often experienced trauma before pursuing higher education, and incarcerated women often experience psychological, physical, and sexual abuse before prison (Bain, 2018).

## **Research Questions**

The following questions were asked and studied to determine whether there were barriers to postsecondary education unique to Appalachian women with felony convictions. As the study used a qualitative research approach, the researcher conducted individual interviews with participants, and a qualitative questionnaire was sent to administrators at institutions of higher education in the Appalachian area.

RQ1: How do key college stakeholders describe the barriers experienced by women students from Appalachia with a felony conviction?

RQ2: What significant barriers exist for women with a felony conviction when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region?

RQ3: What university resources do women with a felony identify for assisting degree completion and successes?

## **Significance of the Study**

The importance of this study lies in its potential to provide tools for practice and policy development for institutions of higher education and increase the success of students with felony convictions in obtaining a degree from an institution of higher education. Increasing the retention and graduation rates for these women will change their lives, and it has the potential to make positive changes for the students' family members. The pathway to incarceration for many of these women includes victimization, damaged childhoods, and mental health disorders (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014). It is estimated 70% of female inmates are also mothers (Snodgrass et al., 2017). Mothers in incarceration report living in foster homes during their youth, being homeless at one point, and approximately 58% report having an incarcerated family member (Valera et al., 2015). Females reentering communities also face socioeconomic disadvantages, unemployment,

and substandard housing. Degree completion allows the women to be financially independent, employable, and contributing members of their community.

It is estimated 1 in 100 of the general population will be incarcerated, and 1 in 32 will be under the criminal system's supervision (Castro & Gould, 2018). Access to higher education is less attainable for low- and middle-class families (Castro & Gould, 2018). The "War on Drugs" has created an increase in sentencing for nonviolent offenses and restricted access to social resources and housing due to convictions (Keene et al., 2018). The Appalachian area is in crisis, and education is a primary solution.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used for key terms:

**Appalachian region.** A 206,000 square mile area from southern New York to northern Mississippi that includes the parts of 13 states and follows the Appalachian Mountains (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d).

**Ex-offender.** An individual who has been arrested, charged, and found guilty of violating a law. For this study, the term will be used to describe an ex-felon (Dansby, 2019).

**Federal prison system.** Persons under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Prisons in federal and private prisons (Carson, 2018).

**Felony.** This term is defined as a serious crime characterized by federal law that is punishable by death or an excess of 1 year in prison (Balich, 2019).

**Incarceration.** This term is defined as serving one time in a prison or jail at the state or local level (Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019).

**Jail.** A facility to house prisoners managed by local law enforcement. Facilities include city or county centers, release centers, halfway houses, and work farms (Carson, 2018).

**Non-violent crime.** Crimes that do not involve the threat of harm, such as drug trafficking, drug possession, burglary, and larceny (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004).

**Opioid.** Pain-relieving drugs obtained by a prescription (Beatty et al., 2019).

**Postsecondary education.** This term is defined as education beyond high school from a 2-year or 4-year accredited university, college, or community college (Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019).

**Prison.** A long-term prisoner facility managed by state government that holds individuals with felony offenses sentenced to at least a year (Carson, 2018).

**Recidivism.** This term refers to a return to prison or jail based on criminal behaviors leading to incarceration (Dansby, 2019).

**Reentry.** This term refers to the return of previously incarcerated individuals to their former communities (Runell, 2015).

**Self-efficacy.** An individual's belief in their capacity to succeed in challenging situations (Wesely & Dewey, 2018).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were components of the study out of the researcher's control and delimitations in the design that may have affected the responses and results. The sample was restricted to ex-offenders and women over 30 from the Appalachian region, limiting the range of responses and localizing potential applications. Some of the women may have previously known each other as the geographical area is small; therefore, they may know each other through incarceration, previous illegal activities, or the treatment community. The members primarily attended one institution of higher education with a lack of experience from other institutions of higher education, which limits their opinions about other higher education institutions. The stigma of a

felony conviction could have also influenced their responses during interviews. The stigma of incarceration is also a known limitation for sharing with the non-ex-offender population (Moore & Tangney, 2017). Because of the stigma, participants from this population may avoid disclosure. Additionally, women are often reluctant to discuss trauma encountered before or after imprisonment due to previous experiences of being blamed for abuse (McIntyre, 2013).

Data about the admission process was only collected from 4-year public institutions in the Appalachian region. This also created a limitation and could alter the data as the admission process and requirements are typically different at 2-year higher education institutions compared to 4-year institutions.

The lack of prior research for the topic presents limitations, given the few studies in the field. There has been limited research on female ex-offenders returning to school. Although there is some research on ex-felons returning to society and nontraditional aged men entering higher education, the research narrowed considerably when the search combines female ex-felons and higher education. The lack of research on this topic was a common theme among the few studies found. The final limitation was observer bias; the researcher has worked directly with this population and needed to avoid making assumptions when collecting data.

### **Methods**

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to collect information that provides a breadth of understanding of a high-risk population. The phenomenology approach provides real or personal experience data based on events or interpretations of events (Morris et al., 2014). Qualitative research provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of subjects and built on knowledge based on unique perspectives (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The

phenomenology method provided the researcher with data from multiple individuals' shared experiences.

## **Questionnaire**

Data were collected from administrators from institutions of higher education through a questionnaire. This collected information gave the researcher the baseline data for institutional practices and admittance policies for students with a felony conviction. The researcher's institution of employment includes a criminal background question on the admission application, but this may not be the case for other institutions. The questionnaire provided this needed information to determine if this is the practice at other institutions. The questionnaire responses then guided the individual interview questions with participants.

A questionnaire pilot test was administered to determine appropriate completion time, question content, and order. The pilot test was necessary to produce a usable survey that assessed question clarity and survey time (Fink, 2017). The pilot test was completed by the registrar at Western Kentucky University. After completing the pilot test, the questionnaire was then distributed to higher education administrators at eight public institutions in the Appalachian region through a Microsoft Office form. The questionnaire focused on admission policies and procedures for former ex-offenders and services offered on each campus. The questionnaire was emailed to eight administrators at Marshall University, Berea College, the University of Virginia at Wise, Morehead State University, Eastern Kentucky University, Ohio University-Southern campus, Shawnee State University, and West Virginia State University.

Descriptive statistics about the institutions were collected along with question responses to help assess each institution's admission policies, student demographics, opinions on student

success, and processes. The questionnaire data were documented in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which was used to identify themes and gain knowledge for individual interviews.

### **Individual Interviews**

A pilot interview was administered to one individual before the formal individual interviews were administered. The pilot interview gave the researcher a better understanding of question interpretation and sequence. The research topic was a difficult topic that could have produced difficult responses for the participants. The feedback allowed the researcher to restructure questions that could appear intrusive and unnecessary for the needed data for the research questions. The individual who completed the pilot interview also suggested asking the individuals if they wanted to see the questions before their interview. The individual who completed the pilot interview indicated this would assist with building rapport and trust between the researcher and the participant.

To identify participants, the researcher sent emails to identify participants to colleagues who work in higher education and professionals at recovery facilities. A convenience sample of five women who attended different universities in the Appalachian area were interviewed for this study. The researcher used a semistructured strategy for individual interviews. Semistructured questions encourage discussion between the participant and researcher and discover meanings attached to experiences (Morris et al., 2014). Interviews were 30- to 45-minute audio-recorded sessions. Participants chose a pseudonym and reviewed interview transcripts for accuracy.

The data collected from both the sample of former offenders enrolled in a postsecondary education program, and selected administrators from institutions of higher education in the Appalachian region assisted the researcher in identifying best practices to support students



through graduation completion and job placement. The phenomenology study focused on “what” and “how” the individuals experienced pursuing higher education.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter one allowed the researcher to introduce the problem, purpose, and background information about women with a felony conviction pursuing higher education. The researcher introduced the terms and the significance of the study. The next chapter will include further research on the different components of incarceration and women from Appalachia.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

There has been limited research in the area of ex-felons pursuing higher education after incarceration. Researchers who have studied this topic indicated this as a common limitation (Austin et al., 2018; Pollack, 2009; Clone & DeHart, 2014). Historically, higher education has been an opportunity for privileged individuals; ex-felons typically do not fall into this category due to financial hardship (Sokoloff et al., 2017). In reviewing the literature, the researcher identified four categories to guide the development of the chapter. The identified categories are felony disenfranchisement, incarceration for women, women of Appalachia, and higher education special admission policies. The categories allowed the researcher to discover new research areas and gain a general understanding of the criminal justice system.

### **Felony Disenfranchisement**

To truly understand the disenfranchisement of felons, one must look at case studies. Most of society is unaware of the challenges ex-offenders face after incarceration. State initiatives such as Amendment 4, Ban the Box, and the Work Opportunity tax credit are just three examples of changes states are making to address the problem (Herman, 2018; English 2018).

Desmond Meade, a Florida ex-offender and now the head of the Florida Right Restoration Coalition, has fought to amend the Florida law that prevents ex-offenders from voting for life. According to Herman (2018), 1.69 million Floridians cannot vote, and 6.1 million ex-felons in the United States are not eligible to vote. Herman examined the state laws for ex-offenders and the multiple policies on ex-offender voter rights. Florida, Kentucky, Iowa, and Virginia ban ex-felons from voting indefinitely (Herman, 2018). In 2018, Amendment 4 was passed in Florida, and voting rights were automatically restored to individuals with a felony conviction without the requirement to petition the governor (Herman, 2018). Before Amendment

4, Governor Scott had made it harder for ex-offenders to restore their voting rights. In 2011, Scott created new clemency rules that required ex-offenders to wait 5 to 7 years after release to petition for their voter rights, and 90% of petitions were denied for various reasons (Herman, 2018).

This disenfranchisement prevented many underrepresented populations from voting in elections. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union and Meade, the necessary signatures for Amendment 4 were acquired from both parties (Herman, 2018). Meade paired up with Volze, a former Republican lobbyist, to gain support for the amendment. Volze shared that ex-offenders who have voting rights are less likely to commit future crimes and more likely to get jobs (Herman, 2018). Meade's experiences gave him the drive to change the way ex-offenders are treated after incarceration. As Meade shared in his story, he is one of the few who avoided recidivism and was able to find employment against all odds (Herman, 2018).

Employment for ex-offenders continues to be a barrier to reentry into society. Society wants ex-felons to work and contribute to the community, but their previous crimes often prevent them from being hired. In 2018, English, a law student at Indiana University, studied the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) and Ban the Box policy. English (2018) shared approximately 700,000 prisoners are released from prison each year. English's research found ex-offenders immediately encounter obstacles that often lead to recidivism. Two thirds of offenders were rearrested in the first three years after release. These statistics have created a national conversation on criminal justice reform. As English (2018) suggested, most offenders face employment barriers due to lack of education, less work experience, and the stigma of incarceration. The Indiana Department of Corrections reported an unemployed ex-offender is 1.5 times more likely to return to jail (English, 2018).

Education has become a backup to employment. Many offenders are completing their GED and college classes while incarcerated. This benefit allows them to pursue education after release. Education is the next pathway they choose when they struggle to get a job (Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019).

English (2018) examined two national policies aimed at increasing employment for ex-offenders. The WOTC was an initiative supported by President Obama, and the policy was designed to offer tax credits to employers who hire ex-offenders. There are eight different identified groups that qualify for tax exemptions for employers, and ex-felons are among the groups. The employer can then claim a tax credit of 25% of the new hire's 1st year of qualified wages. English (2018) determined although the policy had good intentions, the number of ex-felons employed through the program was far less than the other groups. In 2012, 892,314 certifications for tax exemptions were issued to employers, with only 22,063 of these being ex-felons.

The second policy English (2018) reviewed was the Ban the Box. The Ban the Box policy prevents employers from asking ex-offenders about their criminal history. Institutions of higher education in New York have implemented Ban the Box for admissions applications. More than 130 cities and counties have implemented a version of Ban the Box (English, 2018). English found the Ban the Box policy had adverse consequences. Employers who can no longer ask about criminal backgrounds now assume that employment candidates have a criminal background based on race and age. This has created new barriers for individuals based on race, regardless of criminal history. English concluded both policies have good intentions for ex-felons but argued neither policy improved employment opportunities for individuals with a

criminal background. The policies do not go far enough to promote the employment or education of ex-felons.

### **Incarceration of Women**

The research on employment and educational barriers primarily focuses on male ex-offenders. A significant gap exists in the research and discussions on female ex-offenders. Multiple sources have discussed the opioid epidemic in Appalachia, but this research does not include the increase in incarcerations for women and the increase in children placed in foster care. When discussing the effects of increased incarceration, it is necessary to study the effects of incarceration on other family members (e.g., grandparents and other family members who are now serving as guardians for grandchildren).

Scott (2017), director of Appalachian Studies at the University of Kentucky, wrote a first-person narrative for the *Appalachian Journal*. Her story narrated her experience with her daughter, who is a convicted felon, recovering drug addict, and a mother. Scott admitted, without financial support from her and her husband, her daughter would not be in a good place. Scott provided a detailed description of her family and the characteristics of an Appalachian family, both good and bad.

Scott (2017) summarized the national incarceration statistics from the Bureau of Justice. The United States has the highest incarceration rate compared to any other nation. In the last 30 years, the incarceration rate for women has increased for nonviolent drug arrests. According to the 2019 Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of female inmates increased by 11% from 2008 to 2019, while the number of incarcerated men decreased by 9% (Zhen & Minton, 2021).

Most of the women incarcerated report abuse as a child or by a partner (Wesely & Dewey, 2018). Due to a lack of funding or resources, many of the women were not offered

mental health counseling or an alternative drug rehabilitation program. This problem is not isolated to Appalachia; access to mental health resources is limited in rural areas compared to larger cities (Wesely & Dewey, 2018). When Scott's (2017) daughter was released from prison, she spent months trying to find a job and did not qualify for public assistance or food stamps. Scott's story has turned out to have a somewhat positive ending, but as Scott acknowledged, this would probably not be the case without her family's support.

Scott's (2017) conclusion provided insight and implications for the future of female ex-felons in the Appalachian region. She recognized the stories of women in her family as complicated, and this is true for most women in Appalachia. As a culture, women of Appalachia have more obstacles and battles to fight to complete educational goals. She felt the "progress bandwagon" (Scott, 2017, p. 75) for women has run off the tracks, and the lower socioeconomic areas comprised of African American, Latino, and Appalachian communities were struck particularly hard.

Prisons have started career intervention programs to assist with employment after incarceration. Snodgrass et al. (2017) researched an employment program for formerly incarcerated individuals and identified four themes. The four themes included differences in programs, the impact of faith on recovery and employment, barriers to employment, and looking ahead. Like other sources, the researchers indicated the lack of research in post-incarceration for the female population. The employment program study involved eight women living together in a halfway house enrolled in the "It's More than a Job Club, Sister" program. The researchers provided incarceration statistics like other articles, but they also included the number of incarcerated mothers. It was estimated 70% of female inmates are also mothers (Snodgrass et al., 2017). Forty-two percent of incarcerated women do not have a high school diploma, and prison

vocational programs often place women in low-paying, gender-traditional skill programs. Women often enter prison unemployed and, due to parole restrictions, return to the same communities with lower self-efficacy (Snodgrass et al., 2017).

Snodgrass et al. (2017) asked women to describe their experiences in the career club, specify their search for employment, and explain how they understand their skills for job placement. The participants consisted of eight African American women ranging in age from 41 to 53. Six participants had a felony conviction and two had misdemeanors. Participation in the “It’s More Than a Job Club, Sister” program was required by the halfway house, but inclusion in the study was voluntary. One researcher conducted two separate individual interviews with each of the participants. The second interview occurred three months after the first interview and included reflective questions (Snodgrass et al., 2017).

Snodgrass et al. (2017) found participants had participated in other job programs but did not find them useful. In contrast, the “It’s More Than a Job Club, Sister” job program increased their self-understanding. The program encouraged the participants to identify personal skills and traits applicable to employment. The second finding was about spirituality. Seven of the eight participants responded their faith was guiding them through their employment search. The researchers noted none of the questions referenced God directly, but participants included spirituality in their responses (Snodgrass et al., 2017). The last theme that emerged was participants’ ability to look ahead to educational aspirations and goals. This program allowed them to start thinking about the future.

Snodgrass et al. (2017) concluded women falling victim to negative thinking was the most common theme. There has been a lack of research in negative thinking among formerly incarcerated women and how this affects this population after incarceration. Understanding

negative thinking for this population is critical, as most of these women have experienced substance dependency and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

### **Women of Appalachia**

This dissertation focused on women of Appalachia. It is necessary to understand the culture and obstacles in general for women of Appalachia to determine then if the same barriers or additional ones are experienced by female ex-offenders in Appalachia.

Marcia Egan, an Assistant Professor at the University of Iowa, completed a qualitative study in 1993 on Appalachian women and their path to higher education. The qualitative study included 12 women from Appalachia and concluded Appalachian women are expected to put their families first and education second. Egan (1993) acknowledged the limits of research on Appalachian women. Egan focused on knowing oneself. Women from Appalachia struggle with their inner confidence, and the cultural influences of Appalachian women include the gender role of the woman serving as the family protector. The purpose of Egan's study was to understand the importance of role models and how family expectations affect an Appalachian women's decision to pursue higher education.

The 12 participants were first-generation college students in their late-20s to mid-50s from Appalachia (Egan, 1993). Eight out of 12 participants were social work students in graduate school. The first face-to-face interviews included questions about the women's decisions and influences to go to college. Egan (1993) used feminist and egalitarian values to analyze the conversations. Three themes emerged from the analysis: the importance of role models, knowing self, and cultural and family role expectations.

Many of the women had role models or had heard stories of other women who had persevered through hardship (Egan, 1993). Role models also included instructors who



encouraged their learning. Egan (1993) determined that knowing oneself is an evolving sense for women. The transition from a small community college to a larger institution of higher education was often intentional when developing their self-confidence. Participants saw education as a stepping-stone for developing self-confidence. If they could accomplish smaller goals, they could keep going. As expected, role expectations were the most common theme among the 12 women. They described the family expectations placed on them as a weight. Women were accused of choosing school over their family. The findings suggested educators create inter-institutional linkages for students to take educational milestone steps. The results suggested the role of mother and mate was the common reason for a delay in pursuing and completing higher education. Juggling roles was a common phrase by the women when asked about their ability to parent and attend school (Egan, 1993).

Dr. Nancy Preston (2011) researched nontraditional aged female students who completed an associate degree from a community college in Appalachia but did not continue with their bachelor's degrees. Preston interviewed 24 women from Appalachia. The purpose of the study was to explore how women balanced their multiple life roles with their educational demands (Preston, 2011). What emerged was the concept of balance. Participants felt challenged and supported by their life roles. Some used their experiences to motivate them, while others did not pursue their bachelor's degrees due to their roles and obligations as caregivers. Preston (2011) concluded individuals in society recognized that increasing the educational levels of the nontraditional aged students in Appalachia decreases poverty and offers more opportunities.

Formerly incarcerated women expressed the need to just be a good mom when sharing their stories and narratives (Preston, 2011). The idea of being a good mother creates a complex interplay in decision making after incarceration (Radcliffe & Hunter, 2016). Due to the lack of

studies of formerly incarcerated women from Appalachian, this study can bring attention to the issue and encourage others to share their stories. Sharing stories and narratives is a common cultural characteristic for women in Appalachia. In the Appalachian region, women noted they are morally judged by their hometowns, family members, and society (Preston, 2011). This stress can contribute to a lack of confidence, drug relapses, and recidivism. When ex-offender women tackle these issues, the decision to apply to an institution of higher education can be overwhelming and compound feelings of being judged for past mistakes.

### **Higher Education Special Admission Policies**

As discussed at the beginning of this literature review, ex-offenders face obstacles in employment and voting. The admission process into higher education for ex-offenders is often different than the process is for non-offenders. This study examined if ex-offenders experienced obstacles to admission to higher education.

Custer (2018) reviewed college admission policies for ex-offender students for *The Journal of Correctional Education*. Custer described the current trends and statistics reported by the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) and the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). In 2015, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported 70% of schools collect criminal history information (Custer, 2018). Custer evaluated the available evidence for the effectiveness of special admission policies. The evidence did not support the argument that questions about criminal background increased campus safety. The evidence also suggested screening questions were insufficient in predicting future on-campus violations. The fear of risk, liability, and negligence have created an institutional culture of policies and procedures tied to campus safety due to current events on college campuses. In 2019, AACRAO reported 66% of institutions collected criminal history information.

In 2010, a student was denied admission to Lake Michigan College due to his criminal background and sought litigation based on a violation of his due process (Custer, 2016). The school settled with the student, and the student was permitted to attend Lake Michigan College. Lake Michigan College was required to change its policies to allow a student to plead their case before an admission decision (Cluster, 2016). The use of special admission policies for ex-felons is a topic that deserves further research and conversations on the national level.

In 2014, researchers Pierce et al. randomly sampled 300 admission administrators to gather data around college admissions and criminal background checks. Of the participants, 61% collected criminal background information from potential students. Researchers found few institutions denied a student based on their criminal background (Pierce et al., 2014). After the initial survey, the researchers conducted a two-round Delphi study with 21 college administrators. The first round had nine open-ended items that focused on best practices, and the second round had five additional open-ended questions. The second round focused on the pros and cons of conducting criminal background checks (Pierce et al., 2014).

Most participants indicated that background check questions are for campus safety (Pierce et al., 2014). Still, the researchers concluded there was limited research to determine if these students are a threat to campus. Of the responses, 64% of admission administrator participants indicated background checks reduce violence (Pierce et al., 2014). The researchers acknowledged their study raised more questions than solutions (Pierce et al., 2014).

In 1998, the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), an agency in the United Kingdom, introduced the criminal background question on its standard application (Davies, 2000). It seems some institutions of higher education in the United States have adopted a similar policy, and much like the United Kingdom, there is no guidance or consistency. Some

schools do not ask the criminal background question. Some have a designated admission decision committee, and some have individuals decide if the prospective student with a criminal history can attend the school (Custer, 2016). Davies (2000) recommended U.K. schools address legal issues in human rights and data protection when developing special admission policies.

### **Conclusion**

Since the beginning of this study, the rights of ex-offenders have gained attention through the legislature and in election topics (Meiners, 2020). This topic has, finally, just recently gained national and local attention. This literature review is just a start to the conversation on ex-offenders and their rights after incarceration. Further research is necessary for the areas mentioned in this chapter. The research areas include felony disenfranchisement, incarceration for women, women of Appalachia, and higher education special admission policies. Chapter three will introduce the research design, the participant sample, and data collection for the study.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to research the barriers women with a felony conviction face when pursuing higher education. A qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to collect data from university administration and ex-offenders who had pursued higher education.

### Research Design

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological design to collect data. The reason for the design was so participants could share life experiences, and the researcher could capture the true essence of each individual's experience. McMillan (2016) indicated phenomenological studies include life experiences and narratives. Little is known about the barriers ex-offenders face, and this design allowed the researcher to collect various life experiences to develop themes by using the data from higher education administrators to direct interviews with formerly incarcerated women. A qualitative approach brings knowledge about a phenomenon (i.e., barriers female ex-offenders face when pursuing higher education) that has not been explored (Behar-Horenstein, 2018).

The researcher collected institutional data from 4-year higher education institutions in the Appalachian region to determine the admission policies and practices for ex-offender applicants. Interviews were then conducted with formerly incarcerated students and students with a felony conviction. The researcher transcribed interviews, and themes were identified through manual coding.

Phenomenological qualitative studies ask questions about an individual's experiences, as experienced by human beings, and allow researchers to gain understanding into new phenomena (Willig, 2008). The criteria for the interview participants included women from Appalachia who had a felony conviction and who had pursued higher education after incarceration.

## **Research Questions**

The researcher developed three research questions to answer the question, “What are the barriers women from Appalachia with a felony face when pursuing higher education?”

RQ1: How do key college stakeholders describe the barriers experienced by women students from Appalachia with a felony conviction?

RQ2: What significant barriers exist for women with a felony conviction when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region?

RQ3: What university resources do women with a felony identify for assisting degree completion and successes?

## **Sample Population**

The researcher selected institutions of higher education and women who had a felony conviction to collect two data sources. The two populations provided pertinent information to the researcher and steered the study from a questionnaire to individual interviews. The administrators, who completed the questionnaire, were involved in the intake process for students who have a felony conviction and the admission process for all new potential students. The individuals who completed the interviews were women from the Appalachian region with a felony conviction who were or had pursued higher education.

## **Questionnaire Participants**

The administrators who took the institutional questionnaire were selected using nonrandom sampling. The institutions were all 4-year public institutions in the Appalachian region. Eight university administrators were contacted within the area of admissions. The researcher obtained administrative email addresses from each institution’s website to locate contact information for admission representatives. The questionnaire responses were stored on an

external password-protected hard drive. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was requested and approved before the researcher distributed the questionnaire or facilitated interviews (see Appendix A).

For the questionnaire, eight higher education institutions were chosen from Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia. The 4-year institutions were chosen based on location, type, and size. The researcher selected seven universities and one regional campus to represent different perspectives from the Appalachian region. Table 1 shows the eight institutions of higher education that were invited to complete the questionnaire.

**Table 1**

*Appalachian Institutions of Higher Education*

Institution	State
Marshall University	West Virginia
Shawnee State University	Ohio
Morehead State University	Kentucky
Ohio University-Southern	Ohio
Berea College	Kentucky
UVA at Wise	Virginia
West Virginia State University	West Virginia
Eastern Kentucky University	Kentucky

**Individual Interview Participants**

For the individual interviews, participants were selected using a purposeful nonrandom sampling method. The researcher emailed professionals who work in the addiction profession and higher education professionals to identify potential participants. After identifying individuals, the researcher emailed each individual with more details about the study and allowed them to contact the researcher if they chose to participate or had any questions or concerns. Criteria included women who were now pursuing higher education, had previously attempted

pursuing higher education but did not graduate, or individuals who have already graduated from an institution of higher education.

Other participants were selected using the snowball technique and recommendations from the staff members at Hopesource Counseling Center. A collaborative relationship with Hopesource Counseling Center, a local mental health center that provides assessment, outpatient services, residential treatment, and vocational services, was established between the researcher and owner, Jay Hash. Hopesource Counseling Center is a mental health and substance use disorder treatment facility in Portsmouth, OH. Its mission is to assist ex-offenders through employment and counseling services. The participants were emailed through known email addresses gained from the researcher's previous knowledge or Hopesource Counseling Center employees. The emails asked for voluntary participation in the individual interviews.

The ex-offender population is considered a high-risk and somewhat controversial community. The ex-offender status is a status most individuals are ashamed of and is life-altering (Dansby, 2019). The researcher recognized the reluctance of the qualitative study participants to share their personal life experiences due to stigma and shame. Women, in particular, are less likely to share their stories due to embarrassment. Therefore, the female ex-offender population's experiences have often been marginalized and silenced (Frerich & Murphy-Nugen, 2019). Rapport and trust were essential to collect quality and authentic data. The relationship the researcher developed with the participants was critical for this study. Extra protection of the participant's privacy was essential, and the researcher was well aware of the shame that many of the participants felt when discussing their life experiences. Interview participants were allowed to select a pseudonym to address anonymity. The chosen pseudonyms were Beth, Casey, Cynthia, Sarah, and Tracy. The researcher stored all interview transcribed information and audio



recordings on a password-protected external hard drive. All interview records were destroyed at the completion of the study.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The researcher used a questionnaire and individual interviews for data collection. The data collection was divided into four parts. The four parts included a pilot questionnaire, questionnaire, pilot interview, and individual interviews. The data were collected in a consecutive sequence. Each data collection assisted with the next data collection and analysis.

#### **Questionnaire**

The researcher used a questionnaire as the instrument for collecting institutional admission practice data. A questionnaire was emailed to eight administrators at each site location. An email was sent to each individual explaining the purpose of the study, consent information, and IRB information (see Appendix B). The questionnaire design included open-ended and closed-ended questions about university admission practices and support for the ex-offender population (see Appendix C). The questionnaire also asked participants to include any additional information not covered by the questions. The researcher used a Microsoft Office form to collect the data, and results were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. Table 2 includes the questionnaire questions used to answer Research Question 1.

**Table 2**

*Crosswalk of Questionnaire*

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Questionnaire questions
1. What is your current position?
2. What is the name of your university or college?
3. Where is your institution located?
4. What is your institution's total enrollment?
5. Select all that apply? Two-year degrees, four-year degrees, graduate degrees, and doctorate degrees
6. Does your institution have an open admission policy?

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### Questionnaire questions

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7. Does your institution's application include a question about an applicant's criminal background or a felony conviction?
  8. Does your institution prevent individuals with a felony conviction from admittance?
  9. Are applicants with a felony conviction or criminal history interviewed to determine admission status?
  10. If yes, describe the process.
  11. If students are required to have a background check, are they responsible for the fee?
  12. In your current role, do you work with students who have a felony conviction or criminal background?
  13. Is your institution's administration aware of and discuss the needs and concerns of the felony student population?
  14. In your opinion, the admission application should include a criminal history question?
  15. Are criminal background checks a useful tool for campus safety?
  16. Do females with a felony conviction in Appalachia face increased barriers in higher education?
  17. Is there any information not covered in this survey that you want to share with the investigators?
- 

### **Individual Interviews**

Once the questionnaire data were collected, the researcher moved forward with individual interviews. The researcher collected data through individual interviews using open-ended semistructured questions. The researcher used a life-history interview structure to learn about the participant's life. Life-history interviews provided a historical perspective (McMillan, 2016).

Participants were sent an email explaining the purpose of the study, consent information, and IRB information (see Appendix D). Observations were made by the researcher and developed into field notes. The field notes included both descriptive and reflective notes. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded by the researcher using the Just Press Record application on the researcher's phone. The researcher used an interview guide to direct the interview and to acknowledge consent before the interview started (see Appendix E). The Just Press Record application assisted the researcher in collecting data and transcribing the interviews. Due to increased COVID-19 cases, two of the interviews were administered through

the researcher’s HIPPA compliant Zoom account. The interviews conducted through Zoom were recorded using the Zoom record function. The researcher used the following questions to direct the interview and the conversation. Table 3 includes a crosswalk of the interview questions used to address Research Questions 2 and 3.

**Table 3**

*Crosswalk of Interview Questions*

<u>Interview question</u>	<u>Research question</u>
1. Why do formerly incarcerated individuals pursue higher education?	2
2. What challenges did you experience after incarceration?	2
3. Were you asked about your felony conviction on an application when applying to a university or college?	2
4. What would have prevented you from applying to a college or university?	2, 3
5. What advice or assistance did you receive about applying to a university or college?	2, 3
6. Are there elements to your life that prevented you from pursuing higher education?	2
7. Are there specific barriers that are present due to the Appalachian culture?	2
8. If so, what are they?	2
9. How did your family, friends, and significant others feel about your decision to pursue higher education?	2, 3
10. What barriers do women encounter after incarceration that men do not face?	2
11. Talk about your transition to being a college student after incarceration.	2, 3
12. What role did the faculty and staff play in your success?	3
13. What advice would you give to a student with a felony conviction pursuing higher education?	2, 3
14. What resources did you find to be the most beneficial for success?	3

**Data Analysis**

This study collected data from university administrators and female ex-offender participants. The data from the higher education administration were collected through a questionnaire. The data were needed to determine if universities have a specific process for ex-

offender admittance and if the university has resources for this population. This information was required to establish a baseline for the individual interviews. The researcher used each university's website to collect contact information for the admissions administrator for the institutions. Next, the researcher emailed a Microsoft Office form to the participants. Data from the questionnaire were transferred to an Excel sheet and stored on a password-protected computer.

The researcher transcribed the individual interviews using the Just Press Record application and Zoom recordings. The researcher listened to the interviews to check for accuracy. The transcripts were then sent to the participants to review for accuracy and omissions. The researcher coded the data and identified words, patterns, relevant quotes, and events based on the transcribed interviews. These transcriptions identified barrier themes, including barriers specific to women. The individual interviews allowed the researcher to collect critical life experience data that shaped the themes revealed in Chapter 5. The identified codes and themes were placed into groups using an Excel spreadsheet and stored on the researcher's password-protected computer.

### **Data Bias**

The researcher kept a field journal to document personal notes, establish credibility, and identify researcher bias. Since the researcher was aware of this population due to their duties as a dean of students, the researcher had to push aside any preconceived thoughts or feelings and consciously not use these thoughts when interviewing participants. Reflexivity was necessary for this study since the researcher works with this population with their job duties. Reflexivity allowed the researcher to discuss how their biases, values, and experiences influence the interpretation of a phenomenon (Behar-Horenstein, 2018).

## **IRB Process and Ethical Considerations**

The research study was issued exempted approval from the Marshall University's IRB. At the time of the study, the researcher was the dean of students at Shawnee State University; therefore, no students from Shawnee State University could be used for individual interviews. After receiving IRB approval, the researcher reached out to professional contacts in higher education and professionals in the Appalachian area to identify potential participants. The felony population is considered a high-risk group that has encountered trauma, and discussing their past could trigger thoughts of embarrassment and shame. Special consideration was given when interviewing the women, and emphasis was given to confidentiality, privacy, and the participant stopping the interview if necessary.

## **Conclusion**

The ex-offender population is a vulnerable population and required the researcher to build trust with the participants. The qualitative method allowed the researcher to meet with the participants and hear about their stories and experiences while protecting their privacy. This topic is not a topic that is often discussed due to shame and stigma. The researcher chose the qualitative design for this reason. It took longer than expected to find volunteers to participate in this study due to fear and lack of trust initially to tell their story to a stranger. Chapter four will provide major findings identified through the data collected from the questionnaire and the individual interviews.

## **CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND DATA ANALYSIS**

Barriers that women with a felony face when pursuing higher education was researched through this study. In the middle of this study, this topic became a national topic of conversation for lawmakers, politicians, and higher education administrators (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2019). Due to ongoing changes in laws and practices for admissions to higher education institutions, it was necessary to collect two data sources. One source was collected from higher education institution administrators, and additional data were collected from individuals who had a felony conviction and had pursued higher education.

Data about criminal background check questions on applications were collected through a questionnaire from higher education administrators, and phenomenological data were collected through individual one-on-one interviews with ex-offenders pursuing higher education. The two data sets were collected to provide information on the different experiences of educational practitioners and students. The presentation of the findings are based on the order of the research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

RQ1: How do key college stakeholders describe the barriers experienced by women students from Appalachia with a felony conviction?

A questionnaire was sent out to higher education professionals at 4-year institutions in Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Virginia to collect institutional data concerning admission policies and procedures for applicants with a criminal background or felony conviction (see Appendix B). A total of eight questionnaires were sent to administrators, and six administrators completed the questionnaire. The Microsoft Word form was emailed to each administrator's

university email address. Six of the eight questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher through email. The questionnaire had a total of 17 questions, which included demographic, objective, and subjective question types (see Appendix C). The participants acknowledged consent by completing the questionnaire.

**Institutional Characteristics**

Six higher education administrators completed the questionnaire from four different states. The participants represented 4-year institutions located in the Appalachian region. The administrator roles included an associate director of admissions, assistant director of admissions, vice chancellor for enrollment, assistant director of undergraduate admissions, associate vice president of admissions, and associate director of student services. All participants were familiar with their institution’s admission policies and applications. The institutional demographics are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Institutional Demographics*

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Open enrollment</u>	<u>Background question</u>
Berea College	1,600	KY	Yes	Yes
Marshall University	11,962	WV	No	No
Morehead State University	9,500	KY	No	Yes
Ohio University-Southern	2,400	OH	Yes	Yes
Shawnee State University	3,500	OH	Yes	Yes
UVA at Wise	2,000	VA	No	No

**Questionnaire Major Findings**

The major findings from the questionnaire were based on the individual responses shared by six higher education administrators. The questionnaire data highlighted inconsistencies in the admission intake process, differing philosophies on criminal background checks, and a lack of

awareness of the high-risk ex-offender population. In summary, all six institutions address the felony intake process for potential students using different methods and procedures. Five themes emerged when the researcher analyzed all responses from the administrators using an Excel spreadsheet to organize the answers. The identified themes were the criminal background check question differences, inconsistent admission intake processes, open-enrollment institutions, the use of the common application, and educational barriers.

### ***Criminal Background Question***

Of the six institutions that responded, four include a criminal background question on the admission application. The four institutions that had this question were Shawnee State University, Berea College, Ohio University-Southern, and Morehead State University. Two of the responding institutions did not include a criminal background check question. Marshall University and the University of Virginia at Wise do not include a criminal background question on the admission application.

Shawnee State University, Berea College, Ohio University-Southern, and Morehead State University include a question on the admission application that requires the applicant to indicate if they have a felony conviction or if the applicant has been convicted of a sexual misconduct violation. If the applicant answers yes, all four institutions halt the admission process, and the student is not provided an admission decision until the student completes the necessary steps established by the institution. At this point in the process, all responding institutions have different methods to determine admission status.

### ***Inconsistent Admission Processes***

The institutions that used a criminal background question on their admission applications were asked to share the process for students with a felony conviction. Morehead State University



was the only institution with procedures and a form on its website. The other institutions send students something after they apply. The researcher could not find a university policy for criminal background checks for the new students with a felony conviction on any of the institutional websites from the questionnaire participants.

The information shared next highlights four different processes for students with a felony conviction when applying to Berea College, Morehead State University, Ohio University-Southern, or Shawnee State University. As stated previously, Marshall University and the University of Virginia at Wise do not include the felony questions on the admission application.

**Berea College.** All new and transfer students at Berea College receive the Tuition Promise Scholarship and do not pay tuition, so their admission process is selective. All applicants are interviewed regardless of criminal background.

**Morehead State University.** Students with a felony conviction have an opportunity to discuss the conviction in front of a committee to determine admittance status. The Morehead State University admissions application requires all new applicants to report all criminal convictions through a form found on the institution's website. The potential student includes a complete list of criminal offenses and authorizes the Morehead State University Police Department to review their criminal background. The Morehead State University Police then share this information with the enrollment services staff to decide the applicant's admittance.

**Ohio University-Southern.** When an applicant marks "yes" on the application for a felony, Ohio University Legal Services contacts the student to begin the review process for admittance.

**Shawnee State University.** When a potential student has a felony or sexual misconduct conviction and answers accordingly on the admission application, they receive correspondence

from the Office of Admissions with the next steps in the process. The student is required to complete a release of information form so the campus police can conduct a criminal background check. The student then contacts the dean of students to schedule a meeting to discuss the charges, and an admission admittance decision is made by the dean of students and shared with the director of admissions.

As shown by the admission practices of the four institutions mentioned previously, there is a lack of consistency and best practice. There is also a lack of transparency on the institutions' websites about the process for students who have a felony conviction. This inconsistency in the justification for a criminal background check was evident in the administrators' responses to the questionnaire.

The administrators were asked if they thought the criminal background questions should be included on the application; two administrators *agreed*, two *disagreed*, and two selected *neutral*. When asked if the criminal background question is a useful tool for campus safety, three responded with *neutral*, two administrators *agreed*, and one administrator *disagreed*. As can be seen from the responses from the key decision makers from the survey, there is little agreeance on criminal background checks and the admission process. This topic should be discussed, and best practices should be established to offer consistency and access to education.

### ***Open Enrollment***

Three of the six universities have an open enrollment policy. The open admission policy institutions included Shawnee State University, Berea College, and Ohio University-Southern. Open enrollment institutions accept students who may only have a high school diploma or GED and do not require an ACT or SAT score. At most open admission institutions, grades and test scores do not affect admission decisions. Participants indicated that due to the open admissions

status, the criminal background questions assist the institution in being selective and protecting the campus. Another administrator noted that open enrollment institutions struggle with degree completion, and the felony high-risk populations have a low completion rate. Therefore, the intake interviews allow the administrator to determine if the applicant is sincere about pursuing higher education.

### ***The Common Application***

Four of the six universities use the Common Application for new students to apply for admission to their institution. Morehead State University and Berea College do not use the Common Application. In contrast, the University of Virginia at Wise, Marshall University, Ohio University-Southern, and Shawnee State University do use the Common Application. The assistant director of admissions at Marshall University indicated that his institution uses the Common Application for its admission application, but they do not ask a criminal history question. The Common Application removed the criminal background question from the application, and Marshall University has not added it back into the selective questions.

Marshall University's assistant director of admissions provided the researcher with a link to a report produced by the Common Application organization. The Common Application is used by 900 schools. It helps streamline the application process and saves students time filling out multiple applications (Boyington & Moody, 2020). The report explored trends in criminal history reporting, disparities in trends, and 1st-year submission data from 2014–2018. Magouirk (2020) reported that students with criminal backgrounds are less likely to apply to colleges and universities. That number decreases when you add first-generation and minority students to the data. The report concluded with recommendations from the American Association of Collegiate

Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), a professional organization representing 2,600 institutions in 40 countries.

The AACRAO (2019) Recommendations for Practice:

- Consider removing criminal history supplemental questions if using the Common App.
- Ensure staff members are equipped with relevant expertise to review criminal background history and protect student privacy.
- If retaining the criminal history question, explicitly include institutional policies regarding criminal history on the admission application.
- Delay criminal history questioning until final enrollment verification.

In 2018, Common Application removed the criminal history question from the general application, but member schools can add supplemental questions, including the criminal background question (Magouirk, 2020). In an interview, Jenny Rickard, president and chief executive of Common Application, indicated this was a first step to address equity in the college admission process (Cision, 2020). Common Application is a not-for-profit organization with a solid commitment to access and equity for college admission for all students, especially for underrepresented populations.

### ***Barriers***

All administrators indicated the administration at their institution was not aware of the needs of the felony population. The participants were asked if the administration was aware of or discussed the needs of the felony population. Not knowing who your students are or understanding their needs creates barriers that the school cannot address. Lack of conversations, recognition, support, and understanding are continual themes for the ex-offender population.

As stated earlier, women with felony convictions report more barriers than men after a felony conviction and incarceration. The participants were asked if they think women from Appalachia with a felony conviction faced increased barriers in higher education. Three participants selected *agree* and three selected *neutral*. One participant indicated that this was something that had never crossed their mind. During the questionnaire data analysis, the researcher noted that all participants who completed this questionnaire were male. This could have contributed to the neutral responses.

The cost of background checks for applicants can also create a barrier for a population often in a lower socioeconomic category. The participants were asked if their institution requires applicants to pay for a criminal background check. The administrator at Morehead State University did not have the knowledge to answer that question. Marshall University, Shawnee State University, the University of Virginia at Wise, and Berea College did not require applicants to pay for a background check for admittance. Ohio University-Southern does require students with a criminal background to pay for their background checks before being considered for admittance. This is an expense and barrier for students with a felony that non-felony students do not have to consider.

The questionnaire completed by the higher education professionals provided the researcher with needed data to use when interviewing the women in the next step of the data collection. The data collected highlighted the discrepancies in the admission process and knowledge of the ex-offender population. In the last decade, higher education institutions have increased the assessment of their student body, and this population was left out of the internal conversations.

## **Research Question 2**

RQ2: What significant barriers exist for women with a felony conviction when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region?

### **Interview Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted to gain personal insight into the barriers that women with a felony conviction face when pursuing higher education. Participants were identified through higher education professional contacts and word of mouth from professionals who work with the felony population. Three of the interviews took place in person, and two interviews took place through Zoom due to COVID-19 concerns and increased cases in the Appalachian area. The researcher recorded the in-person interviews, and the researcher sent transcripts to the participants for review. The interviews through Zoom were recorded using the Zoom recording option and manually transcribed by the researcher for clarity and accuracy.

The researcher interviewed five women and used closed and open-ended questions to lead the conversation. The researcher used five demographic questions to collect individual data and 13 open-ended questions to address Research Questions 2 and 3. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to ask the participants follow-up questions that generated new experiences or thoughts not previously shared by the other participants.

### **Participant Characteristics**

The researcher interviewed five women who grew up in Appalachia, had at least one felony drug conviction, and pursued higher education at a 4-year institution in West Virginia or Ohio. All of the women had at least one drug conviction, and other convictions included fraud, child endangerment, and theft. Of the five participants, all but one served time in jail or prison. All of the participants had one or more children, were 33 to 43 years old, and represented

different academic majors. Four participants were Caucasian, and one participant was African American. As shown in Table 5, two of the participants graduated with a master's degree, one participant is currently enrolled, and two participants did not graduate.

**Table 5**

*Interview Participant Demographics*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Parent</u>	<u>Major</u>	<u>Graduation status</u>
Beth	39	Yes	General studies	Withdrew
Casey	39	Yes	Business	Currently enrolled
Cynthia	43	Yes	Sociology	Withdrew
Sarah	33	Yes	Engineering	Master's degree
Tracy	33	Yes	Social Work	Master's degree

***Beth***

At the time of the study, Beth was a 39-year-old former student who hoped to return to higher education in the near future. She was very close to completing an associate degree. Four years ago, she pleaded guilty to a felony drug charge. Her partner was also found guilty of the same charge and was still incarcerated. This incident was Beth's first criminal offense. She served no jail time but pleaded guilty to the felony charge to avoid jail time. She was working as a nurse's aide and lost her nursing license due to the conviction. She currently works full time at a fast-food restaurant. She hopes to return to higher education to finish her degree, but she cannot afford to work part-time and provide for her son. Beth was transparent about her felony conviction with family and friends and hoped her mistakes can help others avoid similar mistakes.

***Casey***

At the time of the study, Casey was a 40-year-old woman living in a sober living facility in southern Ohio. She admitted that sober living is the best place for her to be as she continues on

her path to recovery. She recently returned to higher education to work on a bachelor's degree in business. She had attempted higher education before her arrest and incarceration. Her previous attempts were unsuccessful, resulting in low grades and financial aid suspension. She said her conviction and imprisonment saved her life. Casey was incarcerated for over three years for a nonviolent drug offense and a child endangerment charge. She had difficulties with substance abuse before her incarceration but used her time in prison to address her drug problem. While incarcerated, Casey took advantage of the prison's academic and certificate programs to better herself for her children. She completed 21 hours of college credit while incarcerated and is a certified chemical dependency counselor assistant (CDCA). Casey is the mother of five children. Her oldest child is a senior in high school and plans to pursue higher education after graduation.

Casey was still hesitant to talk about the specifics of her charges and convictions. Of all of the interviewees, her incarceration was the most recent. She admitted she had trust issues with individuals in authority. She acknowledged the child endangerment charge was something she could not speak about without triggering feelings of guilt and shame.

### *Cynthia*

At the time of the study, Cynthia was a 43-year-old woman who had attended college on several different occasions. She had two children, was very active in the recovery community, and was employed by a recovery center in southern Ohio. Cynthia was very easy to talk to and very comfortable talking about her journey with drug addiction and unhealthy relationships. She hoped to return to higher education to finish her college degree but currently owes a balance at her former institution, which prevents her from receiving federal financial aid assistance. Her goal was to be an alcohol and drug counselor for women struggling with addiction in the southern Ohio area. Cynthia has dropped out of school on more than one occasion due to an



unhealthy relationship and drug addiction. She admitted her spouse played a role in her drug addiction and feared he would lose control of her if she completed her degree.

### ***Sarah***

At the time of the study, Sarah was a 33-year-old woman who was a parent to three children. Unlike the other woman mentioned in this study, Sarah was not around drugs as a child. Sarah's parents are educators and very supportive. Sarah became addicted to opioids with her partner at a very young age. After a felony arrest, she entered a rehab facility. At the time of her arrest, she was pursuing higher education. She received all F's for the semester she was incarcerated. After her time in rehab, she returned to continue her degree in engineering and then continued her education and received a master's degree. Sarah was working for a treatment facility and volunteered as a mentor and resource for others suffering from addiction. Sarah has been sober for many years and helps women who are parents and in recovery. Women trust her and see her as a role model.

### ***Tracy***

At the time of the study, Tracy was a mom to one child. Tracy became addicted to pain pills when she was a teenager and was charged and convicted of several felony charges. Tracy's family members reported her for theft, and she was arrested and convicted. After serving time in prison, Tracy was allowed to complete a drug court program for offenders. She completed the drug court successfully. After completing drug court, Tracy pursued higher education and has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in social work. She also successfully had her felony charges expunged. The felony expungement allowed her to pursue a social work career and the required licensure for her career. Tracy currently works two jobs as a program coordinator at a mental health facility and as clinical director of a recovery center in West

Virginia. She spends her days working with women from Appalachia to assist them with their recovery and mental health and providing them with tools to better their lives.

### **Interview Major Findings**

All interview data were manually organized and coded by the researcher. The researcher transcribed each interview and read through each transcript to identify emerging themes. The themes address the research questions using the participants' voices, perspectives, and individual experiences. The researcher identified emerging themes from coding the transcripts and identifying key terms and feelings. The emerging themes were shame and guilt, self-confidence and self-efficacy, experiences with addiction and relapse, mistrust in systems and processes, and employment barriers.

#### ***Shame and Guilt***

One of the interview questions for this study was "What challenges did participants experience after incarceration?" All of the women discussed shame and guilt about their convictions, and the feeling of guilt was immediate. During the interviews, participants felt it necessary to include why they made their decisions and discussed their accomplishments, and all of the participants continued to apologize for their past mistakes. This shame and guilt contributed to a reluctance to pursue employment and higher education. Even after pursuing education, the guilt did not decrease. The women were ashamed of their past mistakes and assumed everyone they encountered would judge them and make assumptions about their character and sincerity in pursuing higher education.

All five interview participants were parents. Three participants were incarcerated when they had younger children. One of the women had her child after incarceration, and one woman did not serve time, so she was not away from her child. The three women who were away from

their children due to incarceration had shame and guilt about asking family members to care for their children and the emotional damage they caused to them. A common theme from each interview included the desire to pursue higher education because of their children. Education provided the women the ability to provide for their children, allowing their children to be proud of their mother. Graduation is a goal they want to accomplish for their children to see them achieve a goal and change their narrative of “deadbeat” parents. Beth stated:

My son is embarrassed that I work at a fast-food restaurant and that we live in an apartment. After my felony conviction, I could no longer find gainful employment, and many places will not rent to me because they assume I will sell drugs. Every day, I am reminded of my past mistakes. After pleading guilty to a felony charge to avoid jail time, I had no idea how my life would change. It’s a life sentence, and I had no idea how it would change my life and my son’s life. I can’t even volunteer at his school.

Women have difficulty transitioning from an offender identity to the identity they had before their conviction (Radcliffe & Hunter, 2016). The felony conviction changes who they are, and the shame and guilt is a feeling that will take many years to overcome. The sense of shame and guilt at some point will transition to a feeling of self-confidence and self-efficacy.

### ***Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy***

All of the participants discussed lack of self-confidence as a barrier they face every day. Lack of self-confidence was especially true when pursuing higher education as nontraditional students in a classroom with traditional-aged students. The participants compare themselves to other women who do not have a felony conviction and think they are less than them. Two of the

individuals commented on the researcher's diplomas in her office. They were intimidated by others who have been successful and have difficulties seeing themselves with a college degree. Due to unhealthy relationships with partners and family members, they have been told they are worthless and cannot be successful. Members of society and systems reinforce this thought when the ex-offenders try to make positive changes in their lives and are constantly reminded of their past mistakes. Cynthia commented:

When I applied for admission to my college and saw the felony question, I just knew the person would say no when they saw my background check. I had already been told no by McDonald's and Taco Bell; why would a college say yes. I was so used to hearing no. I just expect it now.

The interview participants admitted that their thoughts created barriers that contributed to their lack of self-confidence. These negative thoughts contributed to anxiety, fear of failure, and drug relapse.

### ***Experiences with Addiction and Relapse***

The researcher asked a question about the specific barriers that are present due to the Appalachian culture. All of the women indicated the Appalachian area makes it difficult for anyone in active recovery. All five women I interviewed had nonviolent drug offenses. Some of the participants were addicted to pain pills, which turned into an addiction to heroin. One of the participants was not a drug user, but she was convicted of a drug violation because her partner had drugs in her house. Three of the participants admitted to multiple relapses, and one participant admitted to returning to prison. Recidivism is an issue that is always a concern for any ex-offender and addict. Drug addiction has invaded families in the Appalachian region, and relapsing and overdosing are part of the women's lives. Cynthia stated:

Drug addiction does not discriminate. It doesn't matter who you are. The opioid crisis for the Appalachian region is truly a crisis. I was raised in the church, and I still found myself addicted to heroin. It first started with me taking pain pills, and then when I couldn't get them, I had to switch to heroin. The first time I decided to get the help, I was given Suboxone, and then I started abusing that. Having a felony conviction makes you feel like you don't deserve to live or better yourself.

Casey also commented:

I am currently living in a transitional housing unit. It's the best place for me to be. My kids are not with me, but they also know this is the best place for me to be. It provides support from other women who are like me.

After incarceration, women experience harsh socioeconomic circumstances, leading to further illegal activity and drug relapse (Valera et al., 2015). All of the interview participants have been affected by drug addiction. Four of the women have personally experienced it, and one has experienced it through her partner. The barriers the women face make them more vulnerable to drug relapse and an increase in mistrust in the system.

### ***Mistrust in Systems and Processes***

The interview included a question about what would have prevented the participants from applying to a university. All five participants were asked about their criminal background on the admission application. All but one indicated a lack of trust in systems, including the higher education system. When the researcher asked about trust in systems, applicants shared they have dealt with federal, local, and state systems. These systems included the court system, Child Protective Services, the welfare system, and higher education just became another system to add

to the list of systems to navigate. The question on the admission application automatically made them mistrust the institution of higher education. The participants are hesitant to accept help from others for fear of owing the person. The feeling of mistrust has continued as they apply for jobs and even for higher education. Sarah said, "I decided I was just going to do this for myself. I didn't want to ask anyone for help or owe anyone." Beth commented:

My court-appointed lawyer told me to plead guilty to avoid jail time, and I trusted that he had my best interest at heart. I wish I would've asked how a felony conviction would change my life. Some people will not even rent to me because of my felony conviction.

Learning to trust others who want to help was identified as a struggle for all participants. Redeveloping a new social network that does not include former friends and family but includes individuals that the women can trust is a difficult task but needed to begin to trust (Smith & Hattery, 2011).

### ***Employment Barriers***

Securing employment after a felony conviction or incarceration was an emerging theme from all participants. Terms of employment are determined by a background check. It does not matter the amount of time that has passed, or if the charged felony was a nonviolent offense; a felony would disqualify most individuals from employment. If the women could find work, the salary was very low and made it impossible to pay their bills and provide for their children. Two participants shared these barriers continued even after graduation when applying to graduate school and employment. Their felony convictions prevented them from applying to specific jobs even with a bachelor's degree. Tracy stated:

The barrier that I ran across was after I received my master's degree in social work. I had to ask for approval from the West Virginia state licensure board to sit for the social work licensure test even though I had completed my degree.

When the women were asked why they were pursuing higher education, all of the women indicated that they wanted to be self-sufficient and provide for their families. They want to be employable and contributing members of society, and employment begins to address all of the themes mentioned above.

### **Research Question 3**

RQ3: What university resources do women with a felony identify for assisting degree completion and successes?

#### **Resources and Completion**

Throughout the entire study, the researcher heard from women who were proud to be making decisions to better their lives and their children's lives by pursuing a postsecondary degree. Returning to higher education for a nontraditional student is not an easy path. As shown in the findings from the institutions, the application process creates obstacles for the students who have a felony conviction. The criminal background question on the admission application requires students to tell a stranger about their past mistakes, and it requires them to bring up feelings and emotions after they have served their time. The researcher wanted to know what academic resources are necessary for success and degree completion. The researcher looked at all six institutions' websites, and the word success can be found on almost every page when discussing the services and goals of the institution. So, the researcher asked the women what resources helped them with their success.

Unfortunately, most of the resources the women shared are not resources provided by their institution but from their community and network of mentors. The two themes that emerged were mentorship and lack of institutional support.

### ***Mentorship***

All of the women mentioned mentorship as key to their success. They found mentorship from other women who had experienced the same path and counselors at recovery centers. They recognized the individuals to whom they could relate as the ones who made a difference in their success. These friendships and mentorships provided them with a person they could trust and go to for advice, support, and empathy. Casey said:

I am not sure where I would be without the women in my life. They are my mentors, my rock, and my support system. They know my story, and they don't judge me. They want me to be successful.

Sarah stated:

I am active in the recovery community. I had many mentors who told me I could do it. Without them and my parents, I would not be who or what I am. I am now a mentor to others, and their trust in me has allowed me to trust myself.

The women found mentorship from new friends, family members, their church, and the recovery community. All of the women mentioned how a person had changed their life. Mentorship seemed to represent their new life and their new choices. Unfortunately, this same support was not shared from their experiences with higher education.

### ***Lack of Institutional Support***

Unfortunately, the women did not mention support from their institution of higher education. Three of the participants said that this was probably more their fault than the



institution's fault. They were reluctant to ask for help and were reluctant to share the story about their past, as they did not know how the individual would react to their history. Other than receiving direction from an academic advisor, they received little support from the institution. By the time they had entered higher education, they were using the support systems they had in place. Two participants mentioned support from their faculty later in their academic careers. Both participants also received support and encouragement to attend graduate school from their faculty. When the researcher specifically asked about campus resources, all women indicated they were unaware of their campus resources.

This response led to a follow-up question from the researcher about the needed resources. The participants suggested resources that provided counseling, financial advising, career advising, and childcare. The researcher reviewed their higher education institutions, and most of the schools provide most of the resources mentioned by the participants. The resource not offered at most institutions is an option for reduced priced childcare. Still, the women were unaware of the campus resources included on the institutional websites.

### **Interview Discussion Conclusion**

Identifying women for a study who have experienced pain, loss, and societal ridicule about past mistakes was not an easy task when securing volunteers, especially because the researcher asked women to talk about a time they would rather forget. This difficult task for the women was not lost on the researcher, but it created more obstacles than the researcher had planned. Discussing past mistakes and incarceration is a complicated topic, and many women do not want to talk to a stranger about the lowest time in their lives. The five women were willing to take a chance and share their stories. All of the women wished their lives had taken a different path, but they are taking the necessary steps to change their futures.

The researcher provided major findings from institutions of higher education through data collected in a questionnaire and major findings from women with a felony conviction from data collected through individual interviews. Chapter five will continue to discuss findings, address the research questions, identify barriers for women with a felony conviction and finish up with recommendations for practice.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Individuals with a felony conviction pursuing higher education have not been frequently discussed or researched. This study highlighted the lack of research and opportunities for individuals with a felony conviction. Since starting this research study, national attention was generated around voting rights and employment opportunities for individuals with a felony conviction. In 2019, Louisiana, Maryland, Washington, and Colorado removed the criminal background questions from the admission application, while North Carolina and Massachusetts have laws that require the criminal background question (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2019).

### **Discussion of Findings**

The data collected from the institutional questionnaire and the interviews indicated a need for continued conversations around higher education and criminal background checks. The questionnaire data from the higher education administrators highlighted a lack of consistency in institutions of higher education's admission policies and procedures. This study's results demonstrated a lack of awareness from the administrators and concern from the lack of attention to the felony student population from the senior leadership decision makers on campuses in the Appalachian region.

The data collected from the individual interview participants allowed the researcher to identify themes. The researcher identified shame and guilt, self-confidence and self-efficacy, experiences with addiction and relapse, mistrust in systems and processes, employment barriers, mentorship, and lack of institutional support. The interviews identified specific barriers women with a felony face when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region.

## Research Question Summary of Findings

The researcher addressed research question one in the section below. The data collected was from practitioners at institutions in the Appalachian region.

### Research Question 1

How do key college stakeholders describe the barriers experienced by women students from Appalachia with a felony conviction?

The higher education practitioners provided little advice about the barriers women with felony convictions face. Over half of the administrators selected *not applicable* when answering the specific question about barriers women with a felony face when pursuing higher education at the practitioner's institution. The data does not necessarily say the participants are apathetic or do not care about this population but rather indicates they are unaware of the barriers that women with a felony face when pursuing higher education. This lack of attention and knowledge of the felony student population highlights the lack of awareness and campus conversations about how a felony conviction affects a student and the obstacles higher education unintentionally creates for this population.

Four of the six institutions continue to include the criminal background question on the application, even though the Common Application recommends that it be removed due to equity and access (Magouirk, 2020). The criminal background question is a barrier and a deterrent to applying for admission (Custer, 2016). Marshall University was the only institution that used the Common Application and left the criminal background question off the admission application. Removing the criminal background question is a good step in addressing equity and access to education for all students (Magouirk, 2020).

## **Research Question 2**

What significant barriers exist for women with a felony conviction when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region?

The researcher identified three barriers from the individual interviews that women face while pursuing higher education. Barriers included parenting, navigating the higher education system, and being judged by past mistakes.

### ***Parenting***

All but one of the participants were separated from their children due to incarceration or drug rehab. Learning to acclimate back into society and attending school created more guilt for the women. The participants have children and could not find a job that provided a livable wage to support themselves and their children. Higher education provided hope to be able to provide for their children in the future. All but one of the women interviewed were single mothers at the time of the study. Balancing higher education while making up for the lost time was a barrier that all women recognized and struggled with daily.

### ***Navigating Higher Education***

The women can be placed in multiple demographic identity groups. All but one identified as a first-generation college student. All five participants were non-traditional-aged students, one participant was African American, and all were parents. Navigating the higher education system was difficult for individuals in all of these categories. Their felony conviction and criminal background added difficulties when applying to the university and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students can be denied financial aid based on their specific felony charge or picked for verification, which requires additional documents. Examples of documentation include the previous year's W-2s and proof of residency. When the

women applied for admission, some students lived in a residential rehabilitation facility, creating more issues with financial aid. Returning to higher education and navigating the system created continual barriers that followed them until graduation. Some of the women who returned to higher education owed their previous institutions money, or their loans were in default due to their time incarcerated. This financial aid barrier prevented them from qualifying for federal loans and grants and returning to higher education. Their past mistakes continued to follow them and remind them of their past choices, and they must face the consequences.

### ***Being Judged by Past Mistakes***

Society continues to judge ex-offenders after incarceration. This judgment can be found when individuals with a felony apply for jobs, seek housing, and register to vote. Pursuing higher education is not immune to this judgment of the individual. When a person is charged and convicted of a felony, it changes an individual's life. Many individuals do not realize the ramifications of this charge until after they are released from incarceration. Life is never the same for a person convicted of a felony.

The participants shared with the researcher that women are judged more harshly than men after a felony conviction. They are accused of being bad mothers and reminded of their past mistakes. Higher education does the same when it requires an individual to share these past mistakes on an admission application, and the personal details are then shared with an administrator or a committee. They can never forget their past, and they are reminded each time they decide to change their lives. They are afraid to share their history with academic advisors or faculty for fear of being judged or stereotyped. This fear was a common barrier mentioned by all of the women. They each indicated that seeing the question on the admission application made

them rethink completing the application. They were expecting to be judged and denied admittance. At this point, they expect this denial.

### **Research Question 3**

What university resources do women with a felony identify for assisting degree completion and successes?

Women with a felony conviction recommended identifying a mentor or support system to assist with the stress of degree completion. Most of the participants used outside support systems through established programs they had participated in after incarceration. The drug recovery community provided support to participants who previously had gone through an addiction program.

Most of the participants did not use campus resources or feel comfortable asking for help on campus. The participants did not fully trust individuals who worked on campus until later in their higher education careers. Typically, they had a faculty member for several classes and finally felt comfortable sharing their experiences. This was especially true for the women in the social science programs.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

The question that continued to cross the researcher's mind throughout the study was if there was a need for criminal background questions on admission applications. As shown by the data collected from the institutions of higher education administrators, the enrollment process is different at each institution. For institutions that ask the background check question, the process for admittance is entirely different. When researching each institution's enrollment policy, the criminal background question is not addressed in guidelines and cannot be located on their websites.

The researcher concluded that the criminal background question is a practice that has just been the “way we do things.” The Common Application no longer recommends including the background question on the application, but many institutions continue to include it as a supplemental question (Magouirk, 2020). It is recommended institutions assess their admissions process and determine if the criminal background question should remain on the application. Each institution of higher education should evaluate the need for the criminal background question on the admission application.

Removing the criminal background question or changing the question is recommended. If the question remains, editing the question to ask the applicant for more information about the type of crime and conviction dates could provide the decision maker with more details and if an interview is needed before a decision is made. For example, institutions could include a question about sexual violence and require the applicant to have a background check if the conviction occurred within ten years. If the applicant’s crime is over a decade ago or the felony conviction was nonviolent, the applicant would not need to meet with an administrator pending an admission decision.

If higher education institutions continue to include a criminal background question on the application, knowledge about the felony student population is necessary for campus decision makers and senior leadership. Professional staff should be trained on the barriers that individuals with a felony face. Using national organizations such as AACRAO and the Common Application are the best places to find best practices, data, and procedures. This knowledge will allow decision makers to develop policies that address retention, support, and graduation completion when discussing support for high-risk populations.



Higher education institutions should consider partnering with community agencies and recovery centers to provide higher education pathways for ex-offenders. This partnership could provide the mentorship suggested earlier in the study and serve to assist the students and the universities as a pathway for a smoother admission process. Students would also understand their options and realize the campus resources available to them before making the decision to apply to the institution.

### **Admission Policies and Procedures Recommendations**

- Consider removing the criminal background question from the institution's admission application.
- If the institution leaves the criminal background question on the application, consider editing it to collect more information about the type of conviction. For example, is the conviction a non-violent or violent crime?
- Develop clear and defined admission policies and procedures if the institution includes a criminal background question.
- Publish admission policies on the admission website, so applicants know what to expect before applying to the institution.
- Include a time limit on criminal background requirements. For example, did the conviction occur in the last ten years?
- Provide necessary training on criminal background checks and the institution's procedures for potential students with a felony conviction to admission counselors and administrators to equip the staff to answer critical questions.
- Educate admission decision makers on the barriers students with a felony face and provide training on reading criminal background checks.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study is just starting the conversation about students pursuing higher education with a felony conviction. The number of individuals with a criminal background and felony continues to grow. Higher education institutions are experiencing declines in enrollment and have combatted this by identifying high-risk groups such as first-generation and underrepresented groups who often require additional support. The ex-offender group will continue to grow, especially in the Appalachian region. This research topic should extend to other demographics such as men and minority groups. Future research should include minority males who have a felony conviction pursuing higher education.

## **Conclusion**

Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff must remember that students come from different backgrounds, family structures, educational levels, and support systems. The felony population is a population that society feels uncomfortable discussing on campuses. Most educators do not realize they might have a student with a felony conviction sitting in their classroom unless the student shares this information with the instructor. Educators must familiarize themselves with the barriers that students with a felony face each day. When the students graduate, their education enables them to become responsible and contributing members of society. This should be the final goal of all educators regardless of a student's past mistakes.

None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony, or a few nuns—bent down and helped us pick up our boots.

—Thurgood Marshall

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# APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board  
One John Marshall Drive  
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704  
IRB1 #00002205  
IRB2 #00003206

May 6, 2021

Dennis Anderson, EdD  
Leadership Studies COEPD

RE: IRBNet ID# 1752380-1  
At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Anderson:

**Protocol Title:** [1752380-1] A Study of Formerly Incarcerated Women From Appalachia Pursuing Higher Education

**Site Location:** MU  
**Submission Type:** New Project                      APPROVED  
**Review Type:** Exempt Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.104(d)(2), the above study was granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee. Since the co-investigator is Dean of Students at Shawnee State University, no students should be used as part of the interview process due to possible coercion. No further submission (or closure) is required for an Exempt study **unless** there is an amendment to the study. All amendments must be submitted and approved by the IRB Chair/Designee.

This study is for student Marcie Hatfield-Simms.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Anna Robinson at (304) 696-2477 or robinsonn1@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Bruce F. Day'.

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP  
Director, Office of Research Integrity

## APPENDIX B: LETTER TO INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

To Whom It May Concern,

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “A Study on Formerly Incarcerated Women from Appalachia Pursuing Higher Education” designed to analyze if barriers exist for women with a felony conviction when pursuing higher education in the Appalachian region. The study is being conducted by Dr. Dennis Anderson and Marcie Hatfield-Simms from Marshall University. This research is being conducted as part of the dissertation requirements for Marcie Hatfield-Simms and has been approved by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

This survey is comprised of 17 open and closed-ended questions and should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey will be emailed to participants through a Microsoft form link. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate, you may either return the blank survey, or you may discard it. You may choose not to answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Returning the survey by submitting the Microsoft Form indicates your consent to use the answers you supply. Survey responses will be routed directly through email to Marcie Hatfield-Simms. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Dr. Dennis Anderson at 304-746-8989 or Marcie Hatfield-Simms, Co-Investigator, at 740-464-7084. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity at (304) 696-4303.

By completing this survey and returning it, you also confirm that you are **18** years of age or older.

Please keep this page for your records.

**Click to begin the survey:**

[Qualitative Survey Link](#)

Thanks for your time.

Marcie Hatfield-Simms

## APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

### Higher Education Administration Questionnaire

This survey is comprised of 17 questions and should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey will be emailed to participants through a Microsoft form link. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate, you may either return the blank survey or discard it. You may choose not to answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Returning the survey by submitting the Microsoft Form indicates your consent to use the answers you supply. Survey responses will be routed directly through email to Marcie Hatfield-Simms. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Dr. Dennis Anderson at 304-746-8989 or Marcie Hatfield-Simms, Co-Investigator, at 740-464-7084.

#### Demographic Questions

1. What is your current position?
2. What is the name of your university or college?
3. Where is your institution located?
4. What is your institution's total enrollment?
5. Select all that apply? Two-year degrees, four-year degrees, graduate degrees, and doctorate degrees
6. Does your institution have an open admission policy?

#### Objective Questions

7. Does your institution's application include a question about an applicant's criminal or background or a felony conviction?
8. Does your institution prevent individuals with a felony conviction from admittance?
9. Are applicants with a felony conviction or criminal history interviewed to determine admission status?
10. If yes, describe the process.
11. If students are required to have a background check, are they responsible for the fee?

#### Subjective Questions

12. In your current role, do you work with students who have a felony conviction or criminal background?
13. Is your institution's administration aware of and discuss the needs and concerns of the felony student population?
14. In your opinion, the admission application should include a criminal history question?
15. Are criminal background checks a useful tool for campus safety?
16. Do females with a felony conviction in Appalachia face increased barriers in higher education?
17. Is there any information not covered in this survey that you want to share with the investigators?

## APPENDIX D: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear (Name),

I am writing to request your assistance with my dissertation research study. My name is Marcie Hatfield-Simms, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Leadership Studies Program at Marshall University and the Dean of Students at Shawnee State University. The purpose of my study is to identify if barriers exist for women with a felony conviction who are pursuing higher education. I am focusing my research on individuals from the Appalachian region.

My study is a qualitative study that includes individual interviews with women with a felony conviction who have pursued higher education. I am requesting your voluntary participation in an individual interview.

### **Participation in the study includes the following:**

- One 45 minute, one on one interview that will take place in a confidential location
- Interviews will take place in person or through Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions
- The participants will choose a pseudonym name to protect the participant's identity
- Interviews will be audio-recorded, and you will be asked to review the transcripts for accuracy

Please feel free to share this with others who meet the criteria for this study. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact me at 740-740-464-7084 or by email at [msimms@shawnee.edu](mailto:msimms@shawnee.edu) or contact the Marshall University IRB office at 304-697-2770. To participate in this study, contact me at [msimms@shawnee.edu](mailto:msimms@shawnee.edu). All information will be confidential in accordance with the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Marcie Hatfield-Simms

## **APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **A STUDY OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN FROM APPALACHIA PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION Semi-Structured Interview**

**Marcie Hatfield-Simms**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. This interview is designed to gather information from women who have a felony conviction who are pursuing higher education. The interview will be digitally recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. All recordings and data will be stored and protected according to the confidentiality protocol established by the study's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Contact information for the IRB is available should you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as participants in this study. Again, thank you for participating. Your involvement in this study is appreciated.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. May I continue?

#### **Demographic Questions**

1. Are you currently enrolled as a student at a college or university?
2. What is your current job status?
3. Are you from the Appalachian region?
4. Are you a parent?
5. Are you currently participating in any job placement programs?

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Why do formerly incarcerated individuals pursue higher education?
2. What challenges did you experience after incarceration?
3. Were you asked about your felony conviction on an application when applying to a university or college?
4. What would have prevented you from applying to a college or university?
5. What advice or assistance did you receive about applying to a university or college?
6. Are there elements to your life that prevented you from pursuing higher education?
7. Are there specific barriers that are present due to the Appalachian culture? If so, what are they?
8. How did your family, friends, and significant others feel about you pursuing higher education?
9. What barriers do women encounter after incarceration that men do not face?
10. Talk about your transition to being a college student after incarceration.
11. What role did the faculty and staff play in your success?
12. What advice would you give to a student with a felony conviction pursuing higher education?
13. What resources did you find to be the most beneficial for success?