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Assignment 1
Literature Review: College Admissions Policy for Ex-Offenders

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Introduction

Cnaan, Draine, Frazier, and Sinha (2008) indicated that the more punitive and exclusionary in which policies are towards prisoners and ex-prisoners, the less protected are the rights of citizens in general. In 2004, nearly seven million people or 1 in every 31 adults were under criminal justice supervision (Cnaan, Draine, Frazier, & Sinha, 2008). Upon release from prison or probation or parole, ex-offenders are seeking (or in some cases mandated) employment or participate in efforts to further their education. As recently as 2014, 1 in every 4 U.S. citizens had a criminal record (D'Alessio, Flexon, & Stolzenberg, 2014). The attainment of employment is certainly a daunting challenge for ex-offenders especially in their first year of release, as 92% of employers conduct background checks on job applicants (D'Alessio, Flexon, & Stolzenberg, 2014).

The first step or the simultaneous action in which ex-offenders must take along with obtaining employment would be to upgrade their marketable skills through the attainment of higher education credentials. Through documented study, the rate of recidivism is significantly lower for ex-offenders who have obtained some level of higher education credential either while incarcerated or post-release (Hrabowski & Robbi, 2002). Esperian (2010) defined recidivism as one who re-offends after their release from incarceration within a three-year period. The recidivism rate has been documented as high as seventy percent for non-educated inmates or ex-offenders while inmates who received a college education while in prison (or post-release) had a recidivism rate of thirty to forty percent lower than the seventy percent average (Hrabowski & Robbi, 2002).

Due to heightened concerns regarding campus safety in recent years, many institutions of higher education have implemented some form of applicant screening during the admissions process to identify potential students who have had a disciplinary problem at a previous educational institution and to ascertain if the potential student has a criminal justice record of any kind. Ramaswamy (2015) stated the screening of college applicants has become more commonplace as individuals with criminal records are being subjected to a special admissions screening process. These criminal records can include felonies, misdemeanors, and even arrests which could negatively impact an admissions decision of an individual who is an ex-offender or has a criminal justice history (Ramaswamy, 2015). Currently, since there is no constitutional right to a higher education, only the right to equal opportunity, colleges and universities can deny admission to those who they perceive to be a risk to others upon the conclusion of a background check (Cnaan, Draine, Frazier, & Sinha, 2008).

The writer is currently employed at an institution of higher education which currently has a policy and procedure enforced regarding the notification of past convictions of felony offenses which is currently subject to review for possible revision and change. Broward College (2016) currently makes the inquiry on the student admissions application if a prospective student has ever been previously incarcerated or ever convicted of a felony offense. The college does not conduct background checks on applicants which leaves the responsibility of disclosure at the discretion of the applicant. However, if the student fails to disclose and it is later found out that the information was misrepresented on the application, the student is subject to disciplinary measures up to and including expulsion from the institution (Broward College, 2016). If the prospective student does disclose a previous felony conviction or period of incarceration, the student will have a hold placed on their admissions record and cannot proceed with admission as

they will be required to meet with the respective campus Dean of Student Affairs or their designee (Broward College, 2016). During the meeting, the student will have to submit a statement detailing their past offenses as well as desired educational objectives while the campus dean or their designee reviews with the student, their statement, desired educational objectives and the institution's student code of conduct (Broward College, 2016). The prospective student might also have to provide references which can attest to their ability to function within the learning community without being a threat to others (Broward College, 2016). Upon the determination by the campus dean that the student is not a threat to the campus community, the student's hold is released by the campus dean or designee and the student can proceed with the admissions process and register for classes (Broward College, 2016).

The objective of this literature review is to demonstrate that admission into institutions of higher education should not be denied based upon past periods of incarceration or felony offenses. The policy of Broward College which identifies ex-offenders during the admission process should also be the commencement point to provide a support system for this population to effectively complete their program of study which is an essential component to the reduction of recidivism rates among ex-offenders.

Present Day Condition

Ramaswamy (2015) cited a study which conducted a survey of 273 colleges and universities as it related to running background checks and the determination they have on an applicant's admission status. The survey indicated that 66% of the colleges and universities reported they did conduct background checks on student applicants while 25% of the institutions reported that any criminal justice record would result in an automatic bar to admission to the institution (Ramaswamy, 2015). The goal in which has repeatedly been stated by proponents of background checks have been that knowledge of past offenses can proactively improve campus safety (Ramaswamy, 2015). Since 1991, all institutions of higher education in the United States (that receive federal student aid) are required to report campus crime statistics under the Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act, commonly known as the Clery Act (Ramaswamy, 2015).

Custer (2013) also indicated that despite institutions' desire to proactively create a safer environment, the Clery Act does not require background checks to be performed upon student applicants. Although there are continued practices by institutions of higher education to conduct background checks on student applicants, there has not been any evidence to demonstrate that background checks have produced safer campus environments (Custer, Why College Admissions Policies For Students With Felony Convictions Are Not Working At One Institution, 2013).

Dickerson (2008) stated that there were two distinct arguments to the background check debate. The proponents of background checks indicate just as a student's standardized test score and previous grade point average paints a portrait as to what type of student the institution is receiving, a background check enables that picture to be complete (Dickerson, 2008). The opponents of background checks stated that those checks would not necessarily predict future criminal activity. The campus crime statistics reported by the Clery Act have demonstrated that

campus environments are relatively safe and the majority of on-campus incidents are committed by students with no previous criminal justice histories (Dickerson, 2008). At the time of publication, the research study indicated that only one undergraduate institution conducted criminal background checks on every single admitted student, and that was St. Augustine's College, a historically black institution in Raleigh, North Carolina (Dickerson, 2008). As of December 2007, the requirement of all admitted students to complete a background check is still in effect today (Dickerson, 2008). However, the institution did not report if a positive criminal background finding would be a cause for non-admission into St. Augustine's (Dickerson, 2008). In various institutions across the United States, background checks may also be utilized at the time of admission depending on the chosen program of study of the student applicant. If the student applicant selected a profession such as education, counseling, law enforcement, or social work, the institution may not deny admission but could advise the student as to a different course of study due to diminished employment prospects with a criminal justice history (Dickerson, 2008).

Contributions to Organizational Leadership and Solutions

As organizational leaders, in whatever setting we find ourselves in, as the subject matter experts in this field, it is incumbent upon us to be the leaders of the optimal practices in our settings as well as the agents of change. Byers, Copenhaver, and Edwards-Willey (2007) indicated that many institutions of higher education have formerly incarcerated individuals on their campuses. The organizational leaders of the campus communities have to learn to accept this population and assist in having them become welcome members of the college community (Byers, Copenhaver, & Edwards-Willey, 2007). The ex-offender population on a college campus will most certainly feel a social stigma on campus whether they have disclosed or not as the

population will still feel as they have something to prove, as some have indicated in the research, they are still doing time on the outside (Byers, Copenhaver, & Edwards-Willey, 2007).

Custer (2013) stated in the case study of an ex-offender student, that an institution as part of its admissions process questioned a student about a criminal justice conviction that happened over ten years ago. The student decided to question the rationale behind the questioning as the student felt their debt had already been paid to society and all the student desired was to improve their life by obtaining an education. The student was met with continued questions about their background and the student decided to withdraw their application which resulted in the denial of admission based on an incomplete file (Custer, Admission Denied: A Case Study of an Ex-Offender, 2013). Custer (2013) indicated that the failure of the student's admission was not necessarily that of the student; however it is an opportunity for organizational leaders to question whether the inquiry of a 10 plus year old crime in which the individual had paid their debt to society, truly was fulfilling a service to the institution.

As organizational leaders, the writer believes that access to higher education is essential to the success of ex-offenders as the population transitions from one stage of life to another. The stigma that is felt by ex-offenders on campus communities which starts at the admissions process could be mitigated before the completion of the admissions application. Lagemann (2011) discussed in the analysis of the Bard College Prison Initiative that within the prison walls, the Bard College program emphasized academic writing and progressive involvement with academic advisors and faculty. The Bard College Prison Initiative is an in-prison college program which emphasized the completion of an Associate of Arts degree in prison for offenders while encouraging them to further matriculate post-release. The success of this program within and outside the prison walls was outstanding as national community college completion rates hover

around 30%; the Bard Prison Initiative would have completion rates around 97% (Lagemann, 2011).

Richards, Reschenberg, and Rose (2010) further emphasized that the main goal of prison education programs was to increase the educational level of prisoners, improve their chances of success upon release, and reduce rates of recidivism. At the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, the Inviting Convicts to College Program was created to teach offenders while in prison and to bridge the offenders upon release as welcome members of the campus community (Richards, Reschenberg, & Rose, 2010). The participation in these postsecondary academic programs would demonstrate a direct impact on reduced recidivism; increased employment opportunities which in turn would reduce tremendously reduce public tax burdens (Borden, Meyer, & Richardson, 2012).

The writer's change solution to his institution's policy on notification of ex-offenders applying for admission into the college would be to expanding the process to optimize the opportunities for success of the target population. The writer would have the current institution policy of self-disclosure remain intact. Upon notification of the status of an ex-offender, the campus dean of student affairs or their designee would continue to work with the prospective student under the current policy plus have the option to offer the services of the Broward College Bridge Program. The Broward College Bridge Program would be a program that offers college preparatory courses to local correctional institutions as well as be the support, academic, and advisement functional on campus group for the ex-offender population. The partnership with correctional institutions is noted in the research as having a successful academic engagement program for ex-offenders (Borden, Meyer, & Richardson, 2012), the support group component of the program can assist in erasing the stigma of feeling different in the midst of the campus

community (Byers, Copenhaver, & Edwards-Willey, 2007), and having a component to support completion reduces recidivism through the investment in education rather than correctional institution expansion (Richards, Reschenberg, & Rose, 2010).

Conclusion

As organizational leaders in education, we are reminded that there are no laws which require criminal background checks of student applicants (Dickerson, 2008). We are reminded that we are balancing the safety of the campus community, the liability of the institution, as well as providing an opportunity to impact the community at large by providing access to higher education for an underserved population.

The methodology as to conduct criminal background checks as part of the college admissions process should not be utilized as a tool of exclusion, but should be utilized as an opportunity for inclusion, support, and advisement for this population. As organizational leaders in education, we have the opportunity to transform the paradigm of this inquiry from one of exclusion to one of inclusion to enable the support of the target population and for them to possess the optimal opportunity to be contributors into and not detractors from our society at large.

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