

## Article

# Faith-Based Mentoring of Ex-Felons in Higher Education: Colson Scholars Reflect on Their Transitions

Judith A. Leary

Maranatha Baptist University, 745 W Main St, Watertown, WI 53094, USA; Judith.Leary@mbu.edu

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study employs the framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to offer readers an introduction into recently-conducted research on ex-felons transitioning into, through, and out of higher education within the context of the Colson Scholarship program at Wheaton College<sup>1</sup>, in Wheaton, Illinois. Through the material gathered from personal interviews of six completed Colson Scholars, faith-based mentors were consistently seen as significant sources of support in each stage of the college-going transition. Faith-based mentors played an important role in the outcomes of, specifically, faith-worldview development and emotional development. This article seeks to illuminate the problem of the lack of supportive mentors for ex-offender populations in our communities, and to illustrate how those mentors might be found in faith-based organizations, institutions, and houses of worship, as Johnson (Johnson 2011) asserted and also what gains could result from the involvement of faith-based mentors in the lives of correctional populations post-release.

**Keywords:** faith; mentoring; reentry; higher education; correctional education; Schlossberg transition theory; college student development; phenomenology; scholarship; ex-felons

## 1. Introduction

A world leader in incarceration per capita, the United States greatly expanded its carceral operations during the three decades of the “tough on crime” era that dominated its criminal justice system from the beginning of the 1980s (Schmitt et al. 2010). Despite the fact that crime declined overall since the early 1980s, the nation’s prison population increased more than 350% during these decades—although the general population grew by only 33% during these years (ibid.). When prisoners were released from these oft-overcrowded correctional complexes, many returned without significant reentry support to address the structural, societal, and legislative impediments they would face transitioning to the community, leading to high rates of recidivism (Petersilia 2003), or the rate at which

<sup>1</sup> Wheaton College, in Wheaton, Illinois, is a selective private residential interdenominational college founded in 1860 (Benne 2001; Wheaton College 2018b). The college’s mission is that it “serves Jesus Christ and advances His Kingdom through excellence in liberal arts and graduate programs that educate the whole person to build the church and benefit society worldwide” (Wheaton College 2018c, para. 2). As of 2016, Wheaton enrolls approximately 2400 undergraduates and 480 graduate students who attend from all fifty US states, forty-five distinct countries, and over fifty-five church denominations. Twenty percent of Wheaton’s collegians identify as American ethnic minority students. Wheaton is a top-ranked college by such prestigious entities as *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Kiplinger*, *The Princeton Review*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Insider’s Guide to the Colleges*, *Colleges that Change Lives*, *Forbes*, and *The Ultimate Guide to America’s Best Colleges*. According to Wheaton College, only twenty percent of its full-time students in the 2014–2015 academic year were Pell Grant recipients. The Colson Scholarship certainly removes a significant financial barrier to college for students who receive it; based on a four-year tuition scale at the current rate, Colson Scholars’ total financial award is estimated to be over a \$165,000 value (Wheaton College 2018b).

former inmates are re-arrested, re-convicted, or re-incarcerated (Gehring 2000). Although faith had a significant and meaningful supportive role for many who experienced the pains of imprisonment (Sykes 1958), few researchers, social scientists, and policymakers in this era seriously considered the positive role that faith and faith-based mentors could have for ex-offenders post-release, especially when those variables were part of structured faith-based educational programming (Delgado 2012; Eisenberg and Trusty 2002; Johnson 2002, 2011; Johnson and Larson 2003; Johnson et al. 1997; Mears 2007; Zimmer 2005).

In the United States, 95 out of every 100 prisoners will eventually reenter society, meaning that the demographic profiles of the currently incarcerated closely align with the profiles of offenders post-release (Petersilia 2003). Throughout the US justice system, and especially in the correctional subsystem, persons of color—especially young impoverished Black males—are heavily overrepresented, and the possible social, political, and psychological causes and consequences are a routine theme in the criminological and criminal justice literature (Alexander 2012; Petersilia 2003; Tonry 2010). Summarizing the extant correctional research, Joan Petersilia (Petersilia 2003, p. 21) profiled the average US prisoner as one who is likely:

to have been in custody several times before, has a lengthy history of alcohol and drug abuse, is more likely to be involved in gang activities and drug dealing, has probably experienced significant periods of unemployment and homelessness, and may have a physical or mental disability. Most of them have young children, with whom they hope to reunite after release, although in most cases, their children will have infrequently visited them during their incarceration. A significant number of inmates will have spent weeks, if not months, in solitary confinement or supermax prisons, devoid of human contact and prison program participation.

As Petersilia adeptly illustrated, inmates reentering society today will have served more time, be less educated, and be less marketable than those released in previous cohorts (Pager 2007; Petersilia 2003).

In addition, ex-offenders entering educational programs post-release are generally first-generation, underrepresented, low-income students who encounter barriers due to their high rates of illiteracy, learning disabilities, and mental/emotional/behavioral disorders, making them at particularly high risk for attrition (Brazzell et al. 2009; Crayton and Neusteter 2008; Erisman and Contardo 2005; Falk and Blaylock 2010; Gorgol and Sponsler 2011; Harlow 2003; Leone et al. 2008; Levin 2007; Petersilia 2003; Tewksbury et al. 2000). As Brazzell et al. noted (2009, p. 12), “little data are available on the involvement of formerly incarcerated individuals in educational programs in the community,” and even less has been historically known about how faith and faith-based mentoring might influence the transition into higher education for those who attempt it. This particular research, then, is highly significant because it gives voice to a population that is extremely difficult to even identify on a college campus, much less to access, interview, and hear. Nevertheless, much can be learned from the perspectives of ex-offender college graduates on the vital role that both faith and faith-based mentors played in their higher education journeys.

Prior to discussing the results of this study on the faith-based mentoring of ex-felons in higher education—especially in the context of an international journal—it is important to provide a brief foundation of information as to the religious and faith identities that characterize the adult correctional population in the United States, since these also influence experiences and behaviors both in-prison and post-release. Since asking questions about the religious affiliations of inmates is considered by some to be a violation of the privacy rights of currently-incarcerated populations, researchers typically must consult the chaplains who work with these populations to investigate the religious and faith identities of those inmates to whom they minister as well as estimate the prevalence of certain religious practices in order to have some idea of their faith contexts. In one such study, federal chaplains surveyed by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (2008, p. 13) reported that among the inmates in their spiritual care, just over 66% professed some iteration of “Christian faith” (compared to 78.4% of the general population), and that the prevalence of “professing membership in [non-Christian] faiths [is]

higher among inmates than in the U.S. adult population.” State chaplains reported similar adherence rates (Boddie and Funk 2012). Without discounting the importance of substance abuse treatment, mental health care, housing help, and quality in-prison education and job training, three-quarters of the chaplains surveyed considered “support from religious groups after release” (78%) and “access to quality religion-related programs in prison” (73%) to be “absolutely critical” to inmates’ successful rehabilitation (ibid.).

Johnson (2011) reviewed 273 studies published between 1944 and 2010 investigating links between crime/delinquency variables and religiosity variables, finding that 90% of the studies revealed an inverse relationship between the two variables—leading him to conclude that a “faith-based program combining education, work, life skills training, mentoring, and aftercare . . . [can] influence in a paradigm-shifting way the prisoner reentry process . . . with the expectation that this approach will substantially enhance achieving the secular and correctional goal of rehabilitation” (pp. 116, 121). Recent research certainly supports Johnson’s claims that this progress is occurring in US correctional facilities and suggests that *in-prison* religious activities are effective in helping change-motivated and solution-seeking prisoners understand their own criminal culpability, replace antisocial tendencies with prosocial behaviors, adjust to abrupt and prolonged losses of freedom, and experience hope in spite of their circumstances (Camp et al. 2006; Clear and Sumter 2002; Kerley et al. 2005; Zimmer 2005). Indeed, Giordano et al. (2002) discuss the significance of faith-based mentoring in its broader context, identifying both a former prisoner’s faith and their mentoring as potential “hooks for change.”

## 2. Results

The context of this study was the Colson Scholarship program at Wheaton College, Illinois. According to the school’s website, the Charles W. Colson Scholarship “provides former prisoners with a college education and life formation program that develops them as Christian leaders” (Wheaton College 2018d). This program provides full tuition for ex-felons to pursue one degree or credential program at Wheaton, with the possible addition of room and board for undergraduate students (Wheaton College 2018a). Six Colson Scholars who completed bachelor degrees were personally interviewed to gather data on their experiences before, during, and after the program. For detailed background, see Materials and Methods.

### 2.1. Personal Assets and Liabilities: Participants’ Individual Histories

Although not every participant in this study experienced abuse in his home, four of the six shared harrowing stories of verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or a combination. Often these tales of emotional neglect, mistreatment, and physical abuse were exacerbated by caregivers’ substance abuse and continued to affect participants deeply even into adulthood. Half of the participants grew up as children left to fend for themselves, bouncing from house to house and boarding with whichever relative or friend or detention facility would house them. These emotionally dysfunctional upbringings often resulted in substance abuse and other destructive behaviors where criminal arrest was perhaps inevitable, and at least four of the six participants identified themselves as drug offenders. The connection between these upbringings and substance abuse was clearest in the case of Shawn<sup>2</sup>, who specifically referenced episodes of childhood sexual abuse and felt that these abuses resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder, leading him to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol, and eventually to experience incarceration. The trajectory of most Colson Scholar participants seemed to include dysfunctional upbringings in abusive environments and/or abuses of controlled substances.

Nancy Schlossberg (1984) categorized the personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources most likely to influence the healthy sense of self and well-being of individuals in transition as “assets” and “liabilities.” The liabilities participants mentioned having influenced

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<sup>2</sup> Participants chose pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

their higher education transitional process included their histories of dysfunction and abuse, underdeveloped educational skills, a campus environment that they felt exacerbated these liabilities, factors related to age and family, financial instability and indebtedness, and relationship-building difficulties (Leary 2015). Participants' lack of academic skills, underestimation of Wheaton's rigor, and overestimation of their adaptability seriously hindered their engagement and performance. Several factors that accompanied Scholars' ages being higher than the average college student also intensified scholastic challenges and family tensions, such as deaths in the family (and time redirected to funerals, grieving, and estate-settling), greater sleep deprivation, lower energy levels, and increased pressure to achieve multiple marriage-related, familial, and personal goals simultaneously—meaning academic learning paralleled learning how to be a husband, a father, an employee, and even re-learning what it meant to be free (ibid.).

Despite also identifying marital and family relationships as an asset, participants felt that these relationships were liabilities in that they placed valid claims on the Scholar's discretionary time and energy, leaving married participants to feel guilty for their study time, and single participants to observe that their married peers may have “missed out” on Wheaton student life and community. Incoming financial instability or indebtedness exacerbated this dynamic as time spent gaining and maintaining employment to support one's family could have been invested in the pursuit of academic success or family and campus relationship-building (ibid.). Psychological distance between participants and student peers created by gaps in age, personal histories, emotional capacity, life stages, academic preparation, financial resources, and common interests presented significant barriers to relationship-building. According to Nate, these liabilities necessitated overcoming emotional dysfunction and disavowing past manipulative motives in order to experience healing and develop quality relationships. All Colson Scholar participants reported some combination of these concurrent liabilities weighing heavily on their transitions. Although many factors helped these participants to persist—secular and sacred—none seemed to play as significant and consistent a role as religious faith (Leary 2018).

Participants routinely expressed their religious faith as pivotal to their success and meaningful to them as individuals throughout their transitional process, offering several lenses through which to view the role of religious faith in their higher education transitions. Faith was perceived as significant to the participants' higher education transition as an asset offsetting a host of perceived liabilities, as a coping mechanism helping participants persist despite these perceived liabilities, as a reason for the disclosure of participants' criminal past and, finally, as a developmental outcome of the higher education transition—foreshadowing how powerful such a variable might be for the reentry of the greater ex-offender population (Leary 2015). Within-participant statements emerged another significant theme – that of the essential role of support that faith-based mentors played in the higher education journeys of these ex-offender students.

## 2.2. Faith-Worldview Development and Emotional Development as Mentoring Outcomes

James Olthuis (1985) suggested that there are universal ultimate questions and answers regarding our identity and purpose, the existence and source of deity, and the true path to happiness that constitute our worldview frameworks and give our lives context, direction, and meaning. He held that these worldviews are often based more on faith than deliberate rational thought and that they morph “as faith deepens, as insight into reality grows, and as individuals and cultures themselves move on to new stages in their development” (ibid., p. 9). Likewise, Marilyn Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Elizabeth Miller (Schlitz et al. 2010) described a worldview as a complex and coherent conceptual framework, developed over time, that includes and organizes the beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, and ideas that influence how individuals comprehend and interpret reality. It is clear from these definitions of worldview that the participants developed a conceptual framework of faith that built on their previous professions and became increasingly significant to them throughout their time at Wheaton (Leary 2015).

### 2.2.1. Faith-Worldview Development

Participants consistently reported entering Wheaton with an underdeveloped understanding of a faith-centric worldview and that the biblical and theological perspective they gained at the college bolstered their faith, significantly shaping their worldviews. Alpha submitted that

going to Wheaton . . . helps you grasp and wrestle with those questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Who is God, and what role does that play in my life? What am I supposed to do with this life? It helped answer some of those questions, and equipped you to be able to think and understand the world that you live in and how it works . . . [to] answer the theological questions of who we are and what God is requiring of us.

Jonah agreed that “my faith . . . the college has just enlarged that in such a way that I’m not even sure I can measure it.”

Wheaton provided participants with access to the tools, time, and environment for growth in theological awareness, religious faith, and critical thought in order to formulate their worldviews while answering life’s deep and abiding “big questions” (Parks 2000). John elaborated on precisely how his professors spiritually mentored him and enabled him to answer those big life questions:

[Wheaton professors] talked about spiritual formation quite a bit . . . It wasn’t just about the learning [but] the overall picture. The term they used is “faith and learning.” . . . That was in the forefront of our minds. And we did devotions in class, and professors prayed for the students . . . It gave me a sense of purpose and it kind of completes something that was missing there for a long time and answers a question for me . . . [from] when I was 12, “Why am I even here?” And that’s one of the major worldview questions people ask . . . Wheaton has helped to shape me in that way . . . It’s definitely changed my life . . . I think Wheaton College gave me that sense of purpose that I had been searching for . . . It really defined me in terms of where my ministry passion is taking me. I don’t think I would have had that just going to a junior college . . . Now I can say, I have a purpose.

Nate added that through exposure to the type of critical theological thinking that Wheaton offered, students grew more comfortable applying theology to life in order to answer these ultimate questions through biblically-informed worldviews:

The spiritual formation that I received as a result of my education at Wheaton is—priceless. The very way that I think about life was really formed through my being exposed to critical . . . deep and passionate theological thinking . . . Researching and reading the ancient authors and the early church fathers, and really seeing how the work of theology was done over a long period of time, and being able to know that you can stake your life on it, that has changed me. As opposed to before I went to Wheaton . . . I was really full of passion and zeal, but no knowledge . . . I just couldn’t believe that, after everything I had done and all the people I had hurt, that God was really at work in my life to provide opportunities for me to grow as a person and to learn, and to educate my heart and my mind . . . So to be given the chance to really grow and be exposed, and to have my faith sharpened, and really be able to perceive deep things, and scriptural truths, and theological truths, is just a phenomenal opportunity . . . Receiving a higher education is a rare and incredible privilege . . . [and even rarer is] the kind of education that’s available at Wheaton College.

This context was a rich environment for the type of spiritual mentoring that not only welcomed the deep questions, but sought to help students answer them objectively.

Alpha described the importance of this faith development to life after Wheaton as follows: “You transition to the real world and you take all that stuff you had there and apply it . . . It’s easy, you know, not to be in contact with hunger when your refrigerator is full, but when you leave those protective cocoons and enter the world and things start hitting you, you know? That [faith] is still able to maintain

you and keep you on course.” Nate also explained how his Wheaton experience continues to have a pervasive effect on his faith development: “Everything . . . challenged my faith, informed my faith, convicted my faith, and stretched my faith . . . It affects every way I think in my life today because of the information . . . and the challenges and the knowledge [to which] I was exposed.” Indeed, the faith development that a Wheaton education encouraged remained long after the graduation ceremonies concluded. Jonah even felt this faith development drove him to minister to others post-Wheaton because of the influence of faith-based mentoring in his life:

I have an understanding of [God] because someone else helped me get it, so . . . I think I’ll die trying to help other people get a better understanding of . . . ultimate truth . . . Maybe I will go out one day and minister to a homeless guy and he’ll remove himself from the streets, and become a disciple and then go disciple . . . It’s far-fetched, but it’s like, when people have purpose, I just think their response is different, and you need educated people to actually give it to them—the blind can’t lead the blind.

### 2.2.2. Emotional Development

Emotional development was a recurrent theme across all participants. Two individuals, however, communicated especially poignant stories of how they experienced emotional healing during their educational programs at Wheaton College, largely due the involvement of their mentors. Nate used emotional language to describe his struggles upon arriving at Wheaton: “I simply didn’t have any framework in my emotional life or in my experiences for being a friend, or for making friends [and] for letting people in, because all my life I had been running from people.” Nate attributed his emotional development over the course of his education to experiences with people at Wheaton College:

[God] didn’t remove from me the side effects of the brokenness, like the loneliness and the inability to emotionally connect to other people . . . but God gave me the opportunity and the time and the place to [relearn those skills] . . . It put me in a position probably most importantly though, to learn how to be a friend and to be loved . . . I wanted to be able to really love and genuinely care for somebody without having to manipulate them. And so over the course of those years at school I learned how to love people. And I think that was probably the most important thing that I took away from it, that I was able to learn to love people and to let people love me in return. And to let it be genuine without thinking that there was some strings attached, which in my former community [the drug subculture], there was always something attached to it.

John similarly experienced emotional healing and development through his reception at Wheaton. Initially, John had described his upbringing without his parents—his father left shortly after he was born and his mother gave him away to a grandmother when he was young. After several more adults in his life deserted him, John concluded that it was actually his mother’s initial abandonment that left him searching for purpose:

“Why did I even exist?” Like when I was twelve . . . I was in a foster home, and I [went] for a visit with my mom, and I knew she didn’t want me . . . I’m twelve years old thinking, “God . . . why did you create me to live here, suffer, die, and go to hell?” That was my basic worldview. It was an ultimate question . . . I didn’t feel worthy of existence . . . My mother had never said she loved me—well, she told me once when I was thirteen, when somebody told her to tell me. And she hadn’t said it [again] until I was thirty-two . . . so from thirteen to thirty-two, no love.

So when he originally arrived on campus, he arrived with all of that hurt, abandonment, and rejection and found that Wheaton would be an emotional respite for him from all that pain:

I experienced people not rejecting me for my past . . . once I let go and experienced their response, it helped me to really appreciate people more . . . As an . . . ex-criminal, you don’t



want to be rejected . . . you want to be treated like a redeemed person . . . [Folks at Wheaton] embraced me and loved me. So emotionally speaking, it helped me to realize I'm not always going to be rejected. I'm not always going to be treated in this way . . . So it really was an encouragement for me, because not only was I not rejected, I was embraced for the first time. And it really opened up some deep friendships.

In John's case, his mentors affected not only his own emotional maturity but enriched his family, expanding their life experiences, opening future opportunities, and providing them with mentors of their own.

For our family, it gave them an opportunity to experience a different kind of culture, a Christian culture, a quality Christian culture like in the communities . . . There was a difference between what you experience in inner-city places versus what we experienced at Wheaton . . . Our children were able to be exposed to opportunities at Wheaton that they would not have been exposed to otherwise. And two of our children took music lessons from one of the students there, and he's been a major influence in their life . . . one of my sons who's now at Bible College . . . pursu[ing] a degree in music to serve in ministry. So a lot of other intangibles came out of that that didn't just directly impact me [but also my family].

### *2.3. Faith-Based Mentors as Significant and Consistent Supports*

This research evidences that the mentors these participants had prior to attending Wheaton, during their time at Wheaton, and following their time at Wheaton played a significant supportive role of encouragement at each step of the transition process into, through, and out of higher education. The most-evident pre-Wheaton example of this type of mentor-support was shared by Nate:

One of my best friends is a retired county prosecutor . . . He knew me . . . well . . . He ended up . . . calling me for odd jobs . . . letting me live with him for a short period of time [and letting me housesit for him] . . . It was things like this and people in the community that really reached out to me and helped me . . . [When I was accepted to Wheaton], they had a surprise party! It was everybody that I knew in the whole community, my whole family, and all these people . . . They had set up a mock judge's bench. And they went through this whole routine, everybody. "This court is now in session." . . . [The judge] had a white wig on and a black robe. And, they went through this whole thing about, "What are the charges being brought before Mr. ["Nate Saint"] today?" And [he] stands up with this sheet of old computer paper . . . the kind that's . . . real long because it's [got] the perforated holes. And he says, "Well the charge against Mr. ["Saint"] is substantial. And we don't see any reason why he should ever be, ever released from parole or probation, or ever get a chance, ever again from anything that he's ever done." And, my friend stood up and he says, "Your Honor, I object, on the basis of the biblical principle in John 18, that Jesus Christ Himself said, "He whom the Son sets free, shall be free indeed." And the judge said, Mr. ["Saint"], this court now finds you a free man." It was just . . . I was weeping with so much joy. All these people here, there they had, all these little old ladies had brought, food and stuff and for somebody who had done all the things that I had done, and to know the quality of the love of these kinds of people . . . They had no reason.

The faith community in which Nate found himself had surrounded him with love, known him, and had chosen to overlook his criminal past based on the commonality of faith they had.

Kenneth communicated a similar example of how his mentor challenged him to begin the program with a great sense of sobriety, beginning in his pre-Wheaton days. Kenneth described this man as not only his mentor but his friend and "spiritual father" who gave him inspiration, encouragement and good counsel:

[My mentor and I] became great friends ... He ... said, "I'm going to help you get into Wheaton, but you have no room to fail." He put the fear of God in me, because I was going to be a pioneer ... So that's how I got into Wheaton College—through the back door ... [He] met with me regularly; he made sure I was doing well ... As a person, he became my spiritual father ... [Another mentor challenged me that] I had to be careful because you could become cynical ... He says, "Guard your heart ... Don't let all this higher academia stuff mess you up with your genuineness of this Gospel." I've never forgotten that; that was real good advice that he gave me.

The investment Wheaton mentors made in the lives of these Colson Scholars did not stop at the front door of the College. John describes how much he got out of his mentoring relationship throughout the ups and downs of his Wheaton program:

We had to have a mentor, which I thought was good, because I had a mentor who helped ... me along in doing a discipleship program and help[ed] me to be a leader, [another] just spent time with me ... Somebody who's older and more experienced and loves you and willing to spend time with you even though you've gotten in trouble ... It says, "You know, I'm an important person." Not in a prideful way. But, "I'm wanted, or I'm loved, or I'm thought well of." And that goes a long way in helping you to stay encouraged along the way, when you do get down and out.

Although mentoring with the program coordinator was a mandatory part of his program, John felt that this campus mentoring relationship was not the only one to provide him with discipleship, leadership, love, and self-esteem. He experienced similar encouragement in the non-mandatory impromptu mentoring inherent in his academic relationships with professors who became additional mentors:

I remember talking to a professor and I was writing a paper and it was very difficult ... And I basically got really emotional because I felt inadequate. And he took the time. He let me save face ... He showed me what—how to structure things, things that you should have already known growing up in school. But nobody—you didn't get exposed to that education. But he took the time to just encourage me and prayed with me right there in his office. And this is a top-tier scholar who was well known who has written books that are published. A person to invest in your life in that way makes a big impact.

Nate also described his experience with mentoring at Wheaton as two-fold. He benefitted from the formal primary mentor designated by the institution (the scholarship administrator referred to by others as the program coordinator) and the informal mentoring of his professors:

The Colson Scholarship Administrator ... really took me under his wing. He made himself available to me not just as an administrator but emotionally available to me as a friend. And his constant encouragement was vital in times of doubt, in times of anxiety. Several of the professors in the Bible Department ... always treated me like I belonged there.

Repeated themes throughout these descriptions of Scholars' mentoring relationships during their Wheaton programs are the emotional availability of their mentors, the encouragement the mentoring relationships brought, and the love, belonging, and emotional healing these relationships seemed to bring, as Alpha underscored:

You know I really didn't experience [obstacles] at Wheaton. That was one of the real beauties of the program. And a lot of that, too, has to do with leadership, specifically. When we got there the coordinator ... just as wonderful man of God with tremendous insight and sensitivity ... This is why the coordinator of a program like this ... is so important ... [Housing] was the incoming challenge out the gate, but he knew exactly what to do every



step of the way . . . The challenges can be a little more difficult [for non-traditional students]. You already have the odds stacked against you in the first place, that you're not going to succeed, going in later in life, not having the academic background . . . and it's a pretty rigorous school educationally . . . The goal is to complete and accomplish . . . that coordinator [is] so vitally important to being able to meet their needs . . . You've got to have the right person with just the right heart . . . and try and accomplish the goal within the means that they have . . . I can tell you that he moved heaven and earth to do the right things . . . a very unique person. Just a wonderful man of God that knew how to minister to me, my family, love on my family as he did, my son, my wife, because when you come as a married couple, obviously it's the whole package coming, everybody goes to college . . . When I think of Wheaton, it's always grandiose, a wonderful experience, a learning institution. And the people—genuine people that have a calling, and those that I met there, the leaders . . . [down to] the people that work down at the janitorial shop, they were all extensions of the grace of God and the love of God.

There seems to be no real substitute for a mentor who can serve Scholars in practical ways, who understands the needs of non-traditional populations in higher education—like ex-offenders—and ultimately, who know how to communicate the love, forgiveness, and grace of God, as is evident in Alpha's mentoring relationship, as well as Shaun's mediated relationship, to Wheaton. As the only participant to recidivate<sup>3</sup>, Shaun described how his mentor acted as a valued liaison upon his release from his second imprisonment, mediating between him and the College (against whom he had committed crimes for which he was reincarcerated):

He and I would just get together a lot. He just kind of took me under his wing and kind of mentored me in many ways. Also, a faculty member I was close to came to see me, and then after I got out, he kind of mediated [a meeting with me and President Liftin] because the president wanted to know why I was committing burglaries on Wheaton College campus . . . Surprisingly . . . he didn't ban me from campus; he actually told me that. Oddly enough, he not only forgave me, but I think he prayed [for me] at the time, which you know, how small do you feel then?

It appears that in the context of the meaningful mentoring relationships at Wheaton College—from the President's office down—forgiveness and grace were extended to everyone regardless of circumstance, demonstrating to them that if and when they failed, they still truly belonged at Wheaton.

This forgiveness, grace and encouragement made an immeasurable difference in each of the Scholar's lives in various ways, and several of the Scholars evidenced ongoing relationships with their mentors decades after their Wheaton graduations. Despite society's labels (Krohn and Lopes 2015), Jonah best illustrated this concept of biblical mentoring as confidence-building, regular, on-going, life-on-life encouragement:

The mentor ideal is biblically based; I think it really helps people in any regard. So having an older Christian man that really knew who I was kind of talk to me a lot and say things like, "You can do it. Be encouraged. Don't worry about stereotypes or labels that other people put on you. Be confident. Believe in God." The conversation . . . we would meet once a week, so we'd usually have a little debrief session to see what was going on, what issues I was having, if there were any, and kind of talk through those. So I think he was a great support . . . He was open to meeting more frequently if necessary, and if you needed to cancel he was okay with that. And then you would just kind of catch up the following week . . . I think he

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<sup>3</sup> The five Scholars interviewed who did not recidivate consistently cited personal dispositions and spiritual resources as the determining factors, while the Scholar who did recidivate (technically giving this participant pool a seventeen percent recidivism rate) suggested that an embittered Colson Scholar drop-out influenced him toward criminal activity.

had great skills . . . We kind of hit it off there and we've been laughing and joking since . . . That's my mentor. He came out to my wedding. He has pictures of my daughter. And any time I'm in the Midwest I actually try to see him when I can.

### 3. Discussion

Johnson (2011) argued persuasively in his research for both the need and dearth of mentoring for US correctional populations post-release, and how faith-based volunteers could fill that gap effectively. On the importance of supportive mentors for ex-offender populations returning to their communities, Johnson (2011, pp. 195–96) asserted the following:

Research confirms that mentoring matters—for kids as well as for adults. The real problem is that we have a severe shortage of mentors, especially for prisoners and ex-prisoners. This is precisely why communities of faith, by far America's most volunteer-rich organizations, are uniquely positioned to assist in alleviating the mentoring deficit. Tragically, almost all the seven hundred thousand people leaving prison this year will do so without the benefit of a mentor . . . It is still very much an empirical question whether congregations will respond to this great challenge of mentoring prisoners and ex-prisoners. Effectively impacting prisoner reentry requires a paradigm shift for many within America's houses of worship.

Johnson's observations revealed an imbalanced reality among volunteer populations within faith-communities, suggesting that so much emphasis is placed on in-prison ministry that post-release ministry is roundly overlooked, requiring a paradigm-shifting corrective to return to equilibrium.

Elaborating, Johnson (ibid., pp. 197–98) reasoned that

As important as volunteer work within correctional facilities might be, it does not change the fact that most religious volunteers and organizations largely tend to overlook prisoner reentry and aftercare. Why this oversight? I would argue that compared to re-entry and aftercare, prison ministry is a much easier task to pursue. Although it may sound counterproductive, prisons provide a much safer and easier service opportunity for volunteers working with offenders. Prisoners tend to be very appreciative of the time and attention they receive from outside visitors, and these exchanges tend to be overwhelmingly positive and non-threatening for volunteers. Because the prison environment tends to be controlled and heavily monitored, prison ministry can be viewed as safe and easy. After completing a quick Bible study or mentoring session, volunteers can be on their way in an hour or two. This may have a great deal to do with the prevalence of prison ministries and why they can be found in many if not most US congregations, and why thousands of religious volunteers visit prisons every day. For the same reasons, I would argue that faith-based organizations disproportionately opt for in-prison ministry as opposed to out-of-prison ministry and the delivery of services to ex-prisoners. Prisoner reentry is anything but easy or safe to confront.

Johnson's (ibid.) assessment for faith-based communities certainly seems to be accurate broadly, but that does not mean that there are no certain faith-based volunteers and organizations on the micro-level making significant differences in the lives of ex-offenders in need of the reentry support that mentors can provide. Given their commitment to providing not only funding but also faith-based mentors for ex-felons in higher education, Wheaton College—while not a perfect institution—seems to be a leader in righting the imbalance that Johnson critiques in faith-based ministries in the United States.

### 4. Materials and Methods

The purpose of this research was to fill critical gaps in the correctional education literature by investigating the experiences of ex-offenders transitioning into, through, and out of higher education (Leary 2015). A transition can be defined as "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Anderson et al. 2011, p. 39).

#### 4.1. Methodological Framework

Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory provided a fitting interpretive framework through which to understand and classify participants' experiences. Its structural emphases on *self*, *situation*, *supports*, and *strategies* aided the crafting of interview questions and the organizing of the participants' responses around the key themes of investigation including (a) assets and liabilities, (b) coping mechanisms, (c) factors influencing disclosure of ex-offender status, (d) educational outcomes, and (e) ways in which Wheaton College provided or could have provided support. Faith and faith-based mentoring were persistently significant themes among each of the five categories for all participants.

#### 4.2. Phenomenological Qualitative Inquiry and the Post-Positivist Paradigm

While phenomenological qualitative research was the most appropriate fit to answer the research questions centering on participants' perceptions of their lived experiences as Colson Scholars (Creswell 2012), my philosophical paradigm as a researcher could be considered post-positivist. Post-positivism operates on three quintessential research tenets including: (a) axiologically, that a researcher's values inevitably influence the research questions and outcomes<sup>4</sup>; that (b) epistemologically, a researcher's theory, hypotheses, or framework (that is, an a priori theory) inevitably influences the research; and that (c) ontologically, our understandings of reality are constructed and fragment apprehensions of a singular overarching reality or truth (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1962; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2011). Post-positivist assumptions and Merleau-Pontian (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1962) phenomenological methods (that is, with emphases on perceptions, bodily interaction with the world, and subjectivity) share similar perspectives and are entirely congruent (Clark 1998; Racher and Robinson 2003).

#### 4.3. Research Setting and Context

The Colson Scholarship at Wheaton College is unique in its provision for education, life-formation, and leadership training of ex-felons, along with fully covering tuition, room, and board for those who meet the application criteria and are selected by the scholarship committee (Wheaton College 2018a, 2018d). To qualify, an applicant must: (a) be a Christian, (b) be an American citizen, (c) have a felony record, (d) be out of prison and established in a local church for at least one year, and (e) submit standardized test scores and transcripts (Wheaton College 2018a). The application process also includes the submission of a completed application; a three-to-four paragraph essay including the individual's statement of faith, statement of goals, and statement of incarceration; incarceration and parole information releases and permission waivers; and three recommendations. Ineligible for the program are felony arsonists, felony sexual offenders, habitual violent offenders, and felony offenders under psychiatric care or taking anti-psychotic medication (Wheaton College 2018a). Funded Scholars may enroll in any of Wheaton College's forty major programs.

#### 4.4. Participant Recruitment and Selection

I utilized the strategy of criterion sampling for this study (Creswell 2012), and the criterion was having completed a bachelor's degree at Wheaton College as a recipient of the Colson Scholarship. This early choice to delimit potential participants allowed me to remove certificate-level-only students,

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<sup>4</sup> As a post-positivist, I understand that my identity, assumptions, and values regarding religious faith and criminality in my roles as a Christian and a criminal justice practitioner relate to my research. Although this means that my findings are incapable of being unbiased, I consistently attempted to own and identify those biases through processes of positionality and reflexivity. I closely and actively listened to my participants and their interpretations of reality in order to grasp their perspectives—while practicing epoché and bracketing my own perceptions—and do justice to their experiences (Jones et al. 2013). Jones, Torres, and Arminio (ibid.) explained epoché as the reflection and identification of one's preconceived notions relevant to the research and defined bracketing as the willful attempt to withhold judgment or appraisal of the research inquiry in focus by setting aside or suspending those presumptions from affecting the research process.

masters-level-only students, non-completing, and current students from participation, narrowing the potential participant pool from 40 to 17 individuals to invite. Wheaton's liaison had contact information for sixteen of the seventeen men<sup>5</sup> remaining and sent them an email including my recruitment letter and informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the value of participants' responses, what they could expect, their rights and responsibilities, the risks involved, and a confidentiality pledge, all in accordance with approved research ethics protocols.<sup>6</sup>

Contacting potential participants through the institutional liaison protected their confidentiality as the liaison did not know which Colson Scholars chose to participate and I never had information for those who did not participate. When certain demographic details appeared to have great potential for revealing participants' identities despite the pseudonym, those details were reported in aggregate form<sup>7</sup>. Over the course of three weeks, potential participants received two invitation emails and one regular postal letter. Recruitment remained open for three weeks and, within another month, six Scholars had participated in the three-hour interviews.

Philosophically, this group of six participants constitutes an acceptable representation for phenomenological research given Morse's (1994) urging that no fewer than six participants should be utilized and Creswell's (1998) recommended range that fell between five and 25. However, the goal of the interviews was to reach theoretical saturation and, based on the coding and categorization process, it was evident that this cohesion and the general unity across responses was genuine. Finally, Copenhaver et al.'s (2007) similar study regarding the social stigma of ex-felons in college had only four participants and yet reached theoretical saturation. Similar to that sample's unique contribution, this group was meant only to be valued for its individual and collective perspectives—and not the promotion of some widespread generalizability of findings—such as trying to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between recidivism and faith-based mentoring, for example.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> No women were in the group of 17, meaning that no women would be represented in the final participants; while unfortunate, this should be considered more of a reality of incarcerated populations proportionally, built-in limitations on recruitment to women, and suspicions that women have differing primary priorities upon release than education.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the fact that this study was conducted with people, ethical approval was required by Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). The content of these three documents was carefully crafted in accordance with the research ethics protocols supported by the HSRB and also approved by the board prior to distribution. The entire project also received expedited approval by the board for initial and continuing approvals for this study. The corresponding ethical approval code is HSRB IRBNet ID #587976, Initial approval: 4/14/14, Expiration: 4/03/15, Extension Approval: 3/6/15, Expiration: 5/05/16.

<sup>7</sup> Aggregate Participant Data. Despite the fact that only six individuals were interviewed, participants represented a surprisingly diverse demographic cross-section. As to race, three identified as Black, two White, and one Latino. One had graduated from high school, while the other five passed general education development tests (GEDs) while incarcerated. All entered Wheaton as full-time students averaging thirty-four years of age, and their attendance at Wheaton spans the four decades of the scholarship's existence. All participants entered Wheaton with transfer credits; as a result, the average stay at Wheaton was only three years. The Colson Scholar participants' majors spanned Biblical and Theological Studies, Communication, Sociology, Christian Education, Clinical Psychology, and Evangelism. All participants lived on campus while at Wheaton; two entered with families, three were unmarried students, and one was married and subsequently divorced while at Wheaton. Currently, five of the interviewees are still in their first marriages, while the one who was divorced at Wheaton has since remarried. These six Scholar participants are either fathers or stepfathers to seventeen children; three of these are young children, six are teenagers, and eight are adults. None of their adult children have attended Wheaton. All participants reported working while earning their degrees, averaging twenty-four hours weekly. Currently, none of the participants receives governmental assistance, and all are employed: two in prison ministry, two as owner-operators (one blue collar, one white collar), one in higher education, and one in independent contractor work as a local delivery driver. Only one participant recidivated after his Wheaton experience.

<sup>8</sup> That faith or faith-based mentoring may have played a role in the five post-release success stories is certainly not inconsistent with the extant literature; however, caution should be exercised against making broad statements regarding faith's or faith-based mentoring's impact on recidivism based on this study as it provides little direct information regarding the specific connection between the two variables, nor was it methodologically designed to do so (Gehring 2000). It would also be inappropriate to utilize this particular study as proof-positive that higher education in a faith-based setting results in lowered recidivism for several specific reasons: (a) participants self-selected into this study (potentially introducing self-selection bias), (b) recidivism for non-interviewed Colson Scholars may vary, (c) individual characteristics known to affect recidivism were not controlled, (d) the sample size was small, (e) participants attended the program across various decades and had diverse interactions, (f) participants had extremely variant criminal records, (g) no direct questions related to factors influencing recidivism were in the interview protocol, and (h) there are similar secular programs to which the Colson Scholarship can be compared.

The quality of this research is undergirded by my graduate-level study of qualitative research philosophy and methods, my prisoner reentry research work leading a data collection team conducting interviews across fifteen Ohio correctional facilities, and the in-depth risk classification interviews I have conducted with several hundred inmates over my thirteen-year correctional career (Leary 2015). I also enhanced the quality of my findings by paying rigorous attention to detail throughout the study, and by applying the four parallel criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In this study, credibility was enhanced by peer debriefing, intercoder reliability checking, member-checking, and researcher reflexivity through informal journaling (Creswell 2012; Guba and Lincoln 1989). Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research setting and context and thoroughly describing the Colson Scholarship (Creswell 2012; Guba and Lincoln 1989). Dependability was increased by documenting the decisions I made in a researcher journal throughout the process, providing thick descriptions while acknowledging my own researcher biases, using strong quotes, employing deductive and inductive coding, and conducting external audits to support the findings (Creswell 2012; Guba and Lincoln 1989; Saldana 2009). Finally, confirmability was improved by performing audits that insured that the data and findings originated from the research interviews, documenting my biases and experiences in my journal, noting the logic behind the conclusions I reached, increasing immersion in the relevant data, providing a high level of attention to subjectivity and reflexivity, and member-checking the findings to discern whether I adequately interpreted and represented what the participants offered as events and experiences significant to their higher education transitions (Creswell 2012; Guba and Lincoln 1989; Morrow 2005).

#### 4.5. Interview Location and Protocol

Participants chose interview locations near their homes, and I began the face-to-face interviews by reviewing the parameters, risks, and benefits of the informed consent form. I followed the interview protocol that had undergone faculty scrutiny and multiple revisions until it contained questions I believed were well-crafted to foster rich feedback and facilitate answering the research questions. The semi-structured interview format not only enhanced my understanding of participants' experiences, but also allowed for misconceptions to be clarified as they occurred and provided space for the acceptance and support of disclosures (Moustakas 1994). All interviews were completed during summer 2014.

#### 4.6. Data Collection and Analysis

As I reviewed the interview transcripts, and throughout the content data analysis and synthesis processes, including the phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and textural description phases, I gave attention to the practice of epoché and bracketing (Jones et al. 2013; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1962; Moustakas 1994; Racher and Robinson 2003; Van Manen 1990). Immersing myself in the data and manually theming, coding, and categorizing the six interview transcripts (Creswell 2012), I identified deductive codes related to Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory and inductive codes not identified with the theory. I then engaged the participants in a "member-checking" discussion to ascertain whether or not I had genuinely captured their experiences (Van Manen 1990), and five of the six participants gave me the "phenomenological nod" that they saw their own experiences in the heart of the findings as captured (Munhall 1994), although one participant failed to respond to two email attempts to contact him. The other five participants' consistent approval of the themes is just one measure of quality supporting the trustworthiness of my findings in light of potential limitations and ethical research considerations.

#### 4.7. Potential Limitations

Despite this level of care, several potential limitations may have negatively affected the quality of the study, including a lack of sufficient prolonged engagement, the potential for researcher bias,



and the potential for a power and privilege dynamic (Creswell 2012). Prolonged engagement over repeated visits with participants (who were dispersed as far as Florida, Massachusetts, and Illinois) was impractical due to the project's time constraints and my commitment to interview the participants in person, although multiple interviews may have enhanced the findings. Also, I hold many biases from my experiences as a Christian and as a criminal justice practitioner; and, although I took great pains throughout the research process to bracket these preconceptions and keep them from projecting themselves onto the participants' responses and my representation of their experiences, it is possible that these biases had some mitigating effect on the research. To abate this possibility, I extensively utilized peer checks and expert reviews of the themes, codes, categories, and findings to ensure that I was not omitting or overvaluing certain responses because of personal bias. Finally, a subtle power-privilege differential may have been present, especially among participants who may have had negative experiences within the criminal justice system, although I did not share my correctional experience until after the end of the interview, if at all. There is also the possibility that invitees who received the scholarship but recidivated may have been too ashamed to participate, or that invitees who may have had bad experiences at Wheaton may have refused to participate due to misinterpreting the study as a pro-Wheaton marketing attempt (since the invitation came from the Wheaton gatekeeper), although I have no evidence whether either of these affected the quality of the findings.

## 5. Conclusions

In light of these results within the context of the Christian faith, logical questions surface such as, "Is there any comparative data on other faith-based initiatives (that is, with Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist, and other religions), or are these outcomes something unique to the Christian religion? That is, are these findings generalizable to other faith-based programs?" Another reasonable question is whether faith alone or mentoring alone (or the combination of the two) was most successful in supporting Scholars' desistance from crime? Essentially, the issue is to what extent did the participants' faith sustain them or the mentoring support sustain them, or both? It was evident from the participants' contributions that both is an appropriate response, but to what actual extent was one aspect more important than another is perhaps a follow-up question best left to operationalize quantitatively at some future point in time. Other questions that still need to be addressed include those relating to the uniqueness of either Wheaton College broadly, or the Colson Scholarship more narrowly, that makes the scholarship program a model program for possible replication at other institutions. Perhaps when established and studied across multiple programmatic iterations in various institutional contexts, the program's ability to help students with periods of past imprisonment and manage society's labels and its social stigma will become more evident, along with how the role of the volunteer mentor serves to support Scholars and practically function for them within that scope. A final question revolves around compulsory aspects of the mentoring process and agency in desistance from crime—for example, John mentioned that mentoring was a mandatory part of his program, but how successful would the mentoring be at assisting the desistance process if the mentoring were voluntary versus compulsory? For now, all of these questions best serve as implications for future research.

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