Health and Justice

RESEARCH Open Access

A mixed methods evaluation of well-being among incarcerated religious education participants in the United States

Robin LaBarbera[1*]

Abstract

Background Research suggests that educational programs that impact well-being show the greatest promise for promoting behavioral change and providing incarcerated men and women with the skills necessary to reintegrate into communities successfully. The development of well-being is a key component of such educational programs, as it affords important protective factors in the face of stress and difficulty and improves individuals' chances of stable re-entry to their communities. The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) is a faith-based, seminary-level, higher-education program that enhances healthy thinking, prosocial behavior, and positive interpersonal relationships for incarcerated men and women in the United States.

Methods We evaluated well-being among TUMI participants incarcerated in correctional facilities in Texas, Kansas, and among groups of formerly incarcerated TUMI graduates in California, Texas, and Kansas. We conducted focus groups with 109 men and women inside six prisons, and 157 people completed mixed methods surveys, for a total of 266 data points.

Results Qualitative results fell into three primary themes related to well-being, namely healthy thinking patterns, prosocial behavior, and positive interpersonal relationships. Participants completed the Flourishing Scale, reporting agreement with all eight statements, with particularly strong agreement to statements related to healthy thinking patterns.

Conclusions Findings provided support for the growing argument that faith-based correctional education promotes wellbeing, which is a key factor in improving behavior, reducing disciplinary infractions, and preparing incarcerated men and women for successful reintegration into their communities. Overall, this research demonstrates the potential value of providing educational opportunities like TUMI to incarcerated individuals.

Keywords Incarceration, Well-being, Faith-based education, Mental health

Background

Faith-based educational programming for incarcerated individuals has shown positive results in terms of rehabilitation and reduced likelihood of reoffending in several studies (Duwe et al., 2015; Duwe & Johnson, 2012; Duwe & King, 2012; Dodson, Cabage, & Klenowski, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Roberts & Stacer, 2016; Schaefer, Sams, & Lux, 2016; Swanson, 2009). Findings from numerous studies demonstrate the benefits of faith-based prison programs beyond educational growth, such as well-being development, increased prosocial cognitions, increased prosocial behavior, and exposure to prosocial role models (Bozick, Steele, Davis, & Turner; Collica, 2010; Courtney, 2019; Duwe et al., 2015; Duwe & Johnson, 2012; Duwe & King, 2012; Dodson et al., 2011;

*Correspondence:
Robin LaBarbera
robin.l.labarbera@biola.edu
[1] Biola University, La Mirada, United States

Kjellstrand, Matulis, Jackson, Smith, & Eddy, 2021; Nally et al., 2012; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Pettus et al., 2021; Roberts & Stacer, 2016; Schaefer et al., 2016; Swanson, 2009). It is evident that promoting well-being and supporting prosocial thinking, behavior, and interpersonal relationships is critical for improving outcomes for incarcerated individuals.

Researchers have traditionally relied on the primary outcome of recidivism to determine a program's effectiveness at rehabilitating an individual who has been released from prison, for good reason, however some scholars have criticized the use of recidivism as the sole measurement, asserting that it is an inadequate approach to measuring the success of an individual after release (Pettus-Davis et al., 2019). Moreover, Gehring (2000) questions whether recidivism is an adequate measure of correctional educational program effectiveness, and he further contends that "recidivism is currently an unsophisticated, dichotomous, terminal variable, incapable of measuring incremental progress toward post-release success" (p. 198). Although recidivism is certainly one aspect of being successful during incarceration and reentry Kjellstrand et al. (2021), it seems that outcomes beyond recidivism might bring a more holistic evaluation of educational program effectiveness.

There is a growing body of literature considering outcomes beyond recidivism to capture positive changes in correctional programming. Outcomes such as criminal desistance, social development, and community well-being (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018); reductions in criminal thinking (Moore & Shannon, 2022); and a sense of hope, efficacy, and overall well-being, which are considered of fundamental importance for successful reentry (Rosenfeld & Grigg, 2022) might better reflect the multiple aims of correctional programs and capture participant achievements more completely. Given this shift in thinking about outcomes, the current research on faith-based education emphasized outcomes such as well-being, healthy thinking patterns, prosocial behavior, and positive interpersonal relationships.

Benefits of faith-based education

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2019), faith-based interventions have been implemented in correctional facilities across the U.S. with the overall goal of promoting prosocial messages, changing criminal thinking patterns, and decreasing institutional misconduct for incarcerated individuals. Proponents of faith-based correctional programs argue that such initiatives can foster personal transformation, reduce the risk of reoffending (Schaefer et al., 2016), promote well-being development (Jang et al., 2021), support inmate rehabilitation, and facilitate the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society as law-abiding citizens (Johnson, 2011). Intensive religious instruction and training generally produces a significant alteration to offender values and behaviors (Johnson, 2011; Schaefer et al., 2016). The assumption is that forming relationships with a community of faith provides prosocial role models who promote positive values reduces the likelihood of engagement in criminal activity (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). Religious engagement is regarded as a vital component of offender rehabilitation and a key factor in supporting former prisoners in leading a crime-free life (Johnson, 2011).

Many scholars argue that a faith-based education may help people who are incarcerated build prosocial lives. They contend that such programs enable participants to cultivate forgiveness, discover meaning and purpose, and enhance their sense of well-being, which may support prosocial coping within the prison environment and upon release (Duwe et al., 2015; Duwe & King, 2012; Jang, Johnson, Anderson, & Booyens, 2021; Johnson, 2011), and it provides participants with prosocial relationships where one can find a community of care, acceptance, and accountability (Collica, 2010; Duwe & King, 2012; Jang et al., 2021; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Roberts & Stacer, 2016; Willison, Brazzell, & KiDeuk, 2011). Religiosity is also associated with increased levels of hope, reduced drug and alcohol abuse, it promotes prosocial behavior, and it serves as a protective factor that buffers individuals from harmful outcomes (Duwe & Johnson, 2013; Duwe & King, 2012; Jang et al., 2018; Johnson, 2011). The benefits of a faith-based education for men and women in correctional facilities are numerous.

Developing mental well-being

There is a growing interest in the concept of mental well-being among people in prison (Jang et al., 2021; Pettus et al., 2021; McLuhan, Hahmann, & Mejia-Lancheros, Hamilton-Wright, Tacchini, & Matheson, 2023; Tweed et al., 2019). Mental well-being generally refers to the subjective experiences of life satisfaction and happiness, a sense of fulfillment, and the realization of one's full psychological, social, and occupational potential (Diener et al., 2010; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Tweed et al., 2019). Practitioners and researchers agree on the importance of well-being during incarceration and re-entry, as it assists returning citizens in finding and maintaining employment, and it helps formerly incarcerated individuals avoid recidivism (Jang et al., 2021; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; McLuhan et al., 2023; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Tweed et al., 2019). Unfortunately, individuals who are incarcerated often report significantly lower levels of well-being compared to the general population, and

they face elevated risks of suicide, self-harm, and mental health challenges during their time in custody (Jang et al., 2021; Kypriandes & Easterbrook, 2020; Lo, Iasiello, & van Agteren, 2020; Rosenfeld & Grigg, 2022; Wallace & Wang, 2020). It seems that promoting well-being among incarcerated men and women is therefore critical for improving post-release outcomes.

Developing healthy thinking patterns (Prosocial cognitions)

Antisocial cognitions encompass the attitudes, values, beliefs, and rationalizations that support criminal behavior, as well as cognitive-emotional states such as anger, resentment, and defiance (Moore & Shannon, 2022). A growing body of research has demonstrated the efficacy of faith-based interventions in reducing criminal cognitions among incarcerated individuals (Folk et al., 2016; Hanser, Kuanliang, Horne, Hanser, & Horne, 2020; Moore & Shannon, 2022; Pettus et al., 2019; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Schaefer et al., 2016). For instance, Schaefer et al. (2016) reported significant improvements in attitudinal change and reductions in behavioral infractions following participation in faith-based programming. Similarly, Moore and Shannon (2022), in a study involving 112 male inmates across four correctional facilities, found notable decreases in criminal thinking and criminogenic beliefs. Complementing these findings, Folk et al. (2016) observed significant reductions in general, proactive, and reactive criminal thinking among 273 incarcerated participants who completed a self-administered cognitive-behavioral intervention. More recently, Hanser et al. (2020) examined the positive effects of a motivational psychoeducational curriculum involving lectures and homework assignments with 203 prison inmates and found significant reductions in criminal thinking. Collectively, these studies underscore the potential of such programs to foster prosocial attitudes, contribute meaningfully to the rehabilitative mission of correctional institutions, and align with broader objectives of reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration into society.

Developing prosocial behavior

Research on incarcerated populations consistently demonstrates that participation in educational programs contributes to positive identity transformation and fosters a prosocial self-concept, which in turn motivates individuals to desist from criminal behavior (Bozick et al., 2018; Brazzell & LaVigne, 2007; Duwe et al., 2015; Duwe & Johnson, 2013; Jang et al., 2018; Johnson, 2011; Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Salvatore & Rubin, 2018). Johnson (2011), reporting on Prison Fellowship—a faith-based prison education initiative—argues that religious engagement plays a critical role in offender rehabilitation and reintegration. Duwe et al. (2015) similarly found that faith-based educational programming was associated with significant reductions in institutional misconduct. In their study of young adults, Salvatore and Rubin (2018) identified a strong inverse relationship between religiosity and criminal offending. A meta-analysis conducted by Bozick et al. (2018) further supports the effectiveness of correctional education programs, showing that such interventions significantly reduce recidivism rates. Brazzell and LaVigne (2007) also emphasize the positive influence of faith-based correctional initiatives on criminal desistance. Collectively, these findings suggest that programs promoting religious involvement within correctional settings may yield important rehabilitative outcomes, including reductions in future criminal behavior.

Fostering prosocial relationships

The development of supportive communal relationships may help explain the effectiveness of faith-based educational programs within correctional settings. Swanson (2009) posits that the inverse relationship between religion and criminal behavior is largely attributable to the experience of living in a faith community—one in which individuals share a mutual commitment to biblical learning and the practical expression of their faith within an environment characterized by care, acceptance, and open communication. The strong interpersonal bonds cultivated in such communities foster both spiritual growth and relational development, and they contribute to reentry success (Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; Pettus et al., 2021; Schaefer et al., 2016). Positive social relationships offer participants empathy and validation, in addition to offering practical advice and strategies for overcoming shared challenges (Matthews, 2021). Participation in religious services has also been associated with increased social integration, emotional support, and higher-quality relationships, all of which are essential to psychological well-being in the face of the chronic stressors common in prison environments (Jang et al., 2018; Pettus et al., 2021; Willison et al., 2011). Positive interpersonal relationships have been associated with increased self-esteem, positive emotions, positive coping skills, and overall well-being, and they are important for improving long-term outcomes among individuals with incarceration histories (Matthews, 2021; Pettus et al., 2021).

In sum, programs that develop well-being, increase prosocial cognitions, promote prosocial behaviors, and expose participants to prosocial role models show the most promise improving for outcomes for currently incarcerated and post-release individuals. In the current study, we conducted focus group interviews and collected survey data from individuals who participated in

a faith-based educational program (The Urban Ministry Institute) while they were incarcerated, to explore the program's impact on mental well-being, prosocial cognitions, prosocial behaviors, and positive interpersonal relationships.

The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) overview

The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) was originally established by World Impact in the 1990 s as theological training for pastors in communities of poverty, and 15 years ago, the Prison Ministry program was added, where church partners function as TUMI satellites to implement the 16-module curriculum in correctional settings. Inside prison walls, the program endeavors to prepare incarcerated individuals for faith-based employment, community service, and healthy family and social relationships through educational, values-based, Biblically-centered programming (World Impact, 2023). TUMI provides a 16-module training program taught at a seminary level. The Capstone Curriculum is designed as a comprehensive leadership program that covers everything needed to prepare leaders for effective ministry. The modules help leaders grow in their knowledge of Scripture, theology, the Christian life, and practical ministry. Students who apply and are accepted typically complete the entire program in four years. No educational prerequisites are required for enrollment, however, as with students who enter other Bible colleges, incarcerated students take tests, have rigorous homework assignments, and write papers demonstrating careful research and reflection. Students often study in groups to help one another process the material.

The purpose of the study

We proposed to examine well-being, prosocial cognitions, prosocial behaviors, and positive interpersonal relationships among men and women who participated in the TUMI theological education program while they were incarcerated, based on previous findings that faith-based education is likely associated with the development of prosocial thinking (Folk et al., 2016; Hanser et al., 2020; Moore & Shannon, 2022; Schaefer et al., 2016), prosocial behavior (Bozick et al., 2018; Brazzell & LaVigne, 2007; Duwe et al., 2015; Duwe & Johnson, 2013; Jang et al., 2018; Johnson, 2011; Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Salvatore & Rubin, 2018), and prosocial interpersonal relationships (Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; Matthews, 2021; Pettus et al., 2021; Schaefer et al., 2016; Swanson, 2009; Willison et al., 2011). Since well-being was anticipated to improve incarcerated individuals' pre- and post-release outcomes, we explored whether participation in TUMI contributed to their well-being.

Methods

Participants

We conducted focus groups with current TUMI participants in correctional facilities and former participants who were previously incarcerated across the U.S. to explore diverse perspectives and achieve data saturation. We conducted focus groups with 109 men and women inside six prisons, and 157 people completed surveys, for a total of 266 data points. Partners who facilitated TUMI in jails and prisons or who were engaged in re-entry work with former TUMI participants collaborated with the primary researcher in a purposive sampling approach to identify participants. In addition, the primary investigator and the director of World Impact's prison ministry emailed a list of formerly incarcerated program graduates, inviting them to participate in Zoom focus groups.

Of the 109 we interviewed, 68 were currently incarcerated TUMI students, and 41 were formerly incarcerated returned citizens who participated in TUMI when they were incarcerated. Demographic data were collected for survey respondents only. Participant evaluations of program quality, assessed through the scale based on the Kirkpatrick Model (2010), are reported in a separate article (L-anonymous, 2023). In this article, we focus exclusively on participant reports of components of well-being.

Of the 157 participants who completed the anonymous survey, there were 118 male and 37 female participants, ranging in age from 18 to 65 +, 116 who were currently incarcerated and 41 who were formerly incarcerated. Table 1 shows complete demographic data for survey participants.

Study procedure

The study proposal was reviewed and approved by the Protection of Human Rights in Research Committee (PHRRC) at the primary researcher's university. The principal investigator contacted the Prison Ministry Director of World Impact to help arrange focus groups and survey distribution to participants. Men and women who had participated in TUMI while incarcerated were eligible to take part in the current mixed-methods study. Recruitment first began by randomly contacting TUMI partners. Two such partners who facilitated TUMI classes in prisons or jails and engaged in re-entry support with graduates (e.g., Epiphany Life Change, TUMI Topeka) agreed to facilitate focus groups and survey completion, and one re-entry support organization (Testimony Ministries) facilitated focus groups and survey administration, and

Table 1 Survey participant demographics

Characteristic		N
TUMI Status	Current student (currently incarcerated)	74
	Former student (formerly incarcerated)	26
Current students: How long in TUMI	n/a (graduate)	27
	1–6 months	69
	7–12 months	11
	1–2 years	27
	3–4 years	18
	More than 4 years	5
TUMI in prison or jail?	Prison	135
	County or City Jail	22
Gender	Male	119
	Female	38
Current Age	18–24	3
	25–34	29
	35–44	42
	45–54	40
	55–64	37
	65 +	6
Ethnic Background	White or Caucasian	59
	Black or African American	40
	Hispanic or Latino	42
	Asian or Asian American	3
	American Indian or Alaska Native	7
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
	Other	6
Sentence length while a student	1–5 years	27
	6–10	16
	11–15	13
	16–20	16
	21–30:	27
	31 +	34
	Life	24
Age began serving sentence	Under 18	11
	18–24	25
	25–34	44
	35–44	41
	45–54	28
	55 +	8

N = 157

each approached individuals to whom they minister to see if they were willing to take part in an interview.

Following informed consent, the respondents anonymously completed hard copy surveys or accessed a direct link to the electronic survey housed on Survey Monkey or participated in focus groups. Qualitative data were collected with currently incarcerated students through focus groups at three Texas prisons and one group of formerly incarcerated graduates in collaboration with Epiphany Life Change and in three Kansas correctional facilities and one formerly incarcerated group in collaboration with TUMI Topeka. Focus groups followed a semi-structured interview script that included questions about participants' experiences with TUMI while they were incarcerated. Focus groups lasted approximately 1–3 h and were audio-taped for later transcription. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants could stop

completing the questionnaire or cease to participate in focus groups at any time with no penalty.

Measurements

To evaluate participants' perceptions of well-being, the primary investigator constructed a 30-item questionnaire that consisted of demographic variables (e.g., gender, current age, ethnic background, TUMI status (whether current student or graduate), and length of prison/jail sentence), a well-being scale, and questions asking participants to describe how the TUMI prison training has impacted their thinking and behavior.

Measures of psychological well-being utilized The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010), an 8-item measure of respondents' self-perceived success in important areas such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism, which provides a single psychological well-being score (Diener et al., 2010). Response options include a 7-point Likert Scale from 1 'Strongly disagree' to 7 'Strongly agree.' Questions such as "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life," "I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me," and "I am a good person and live a good life" addressed healthy thinking patterns; "I am engaged and interested in my daily activities" and "I am optimistic about my future" addressed healthy thinking patterns; and "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding," "I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others," and "People respect me" addressed positive social relationships. Cronbach's alpha for the 8-item scale used in this study was excellent ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Participants' well-being was also assessed qualitatively through semi-structured focus groups and qualitative questions on the survey instrument. Semi-structured focus groups began with questions designed to guide conversation based on general pre-determined themes related to well-being. Focus group questions such as "What influenced you to join TUMI, knowing it is a rigorous, college level program?" addressed healthy thinking patterns; "In what ways do you think TUMI is preparing/has prepared you for successful re-entry?" and "What difference has participation in TUMI made in your behavior?" addressed prosocial behavior, and "How has being in TUMI influenced your interactions with others inside or outside the prison community?" addressed prosocial relationships.

Additionally, an open-ended question on the survey asked participants to describe the kind of person they were before going to prison/jail and how they had changed since participating in TUMI to further understand how participation in the program impacted students' thinking, behavior, and relationships.

Data analysis

This study relied on a mixed-methods research design. We obtained quantitative data from The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) using IBM SPSS version 28 software. We wanted to know whether TUMI graduates were able to maintain their well-being once they had been released, so we first calculated a total well-being score for survey participants (Diener et al., 2010) and then conducted an independent samples t-test to determine differences between groups of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals (TUMI status) on the variable.

Survey respondents and focus group participants also described their experiences qualitatively with TUMI through several open-ended questions, which were coded using a thematic analysis approach (Creswell, 2017) with Atlas T.I. version 22. A team of two independent coders systematically analyzed responses and grouped ideas expressed in participants' answers according to qualitative themes until no new themes were found and a saturation point was achieved (Creswell, 2017). Following their independent grouping of responses according to theme, coders came together to compare the thematic groupings each had identified and their assignment of individual responses to each theme. Where there was disagreement, coders discussed the themes until a consensus was reached.

Results

We conducted focus groups with 109 participants across three states and collected 157 surveys from additional participants in four states to assess the well-being of currently and formerly incarcerated participants in a prison-based theological education program.

Well-being

Table 2 reports survey participants' self-reported level of well-being quantitatively (percentages). As the table illustrates, most participants reported strong agreement, agreement, or slight agreement with all eight statements on the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010); means are reported for each statement. Particularly strong ratings were assigned to two statements: "I am optimistic about my future," and "I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me."

We were also interested in whether formerly incarcerated TUMI participants were able to maintain their well-being when they were released back into their communities. We first computed a single psychological well-being score for all participants (Total Well-Being), which is the sum of all items from The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010 et al., 2010). Then, Levene's test was performed to assess for homogeneity of variances between

Table 2 Survey participants' perceptions of well-being/flourishing percentages

Statement	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Slightly Agree %	Neither Agree or Disagree %	Slightly Disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Mean (SD)
I lead a purposeful and meaningful life	46.62	23.65	18.24	9.46	2.03	0	0	1.97 (1.10)
My social relationships are supportive and rewarding	47.30	18.24	18.24	10.14	3.38	2..70	0	2.12 (1.34)
I am engaged an interested in my daily activities	48.65	23.38	13.51	5.41	2.70	0.68	0.68	1.89 (1.16)
I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others	50.00	25.68	15.54	2.70	4.05	1.35	0.68	1.92 (1.23)
I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me	61.49	20.95	11.49	4.05	0.68	0	1.35	1.67 (1.09)
I am a good person and live a good life	41.50	31.29	17.01	8.16	1.36	0	0.68	1.99 (1.10)
I am optimistic about my future	64.86	25.68	5.41	2.70	0.68	0	0.68	1.51 (0.89)
People respect me	43.92	33.11	16.22	6.08	0.68	0	0	1.86 (0.94)

N = 157

groups. Levene's test showed that the variances for well-being were not equal, $F(1,147) = 7.08$, $p < 0.05$. An independent samples t-test showed that the formerly incarcerated TUMI graduates ($M = 52.48$, $SD = 4.77$) reported higher levels of well-being ($t = -4.57$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 6.65$) than the currently incarcerated participants ($M = 47.81$, $SD = 7.20$).

Qualitative results

We relied on semi-structured focus groups and qualitative survey responses to explore well-being and to allow currently and formerly incarcerated participants the freedom to expand on the topic. Here, we describe the various reactions to questions related to mental well-being, which fell into three primary themes: (1) prosocial thinking; (2) prosocial behavior; and (3) positive interpersonal relationships (2021).

Theme 1: prosocial thinking

One category that emerged from the open-ended responses and focus groups suggested that the TUMI program positively impacted participants' self-respect or the way they thought about themselves. Before participating in TUMI, participants judged themselves as selfish, immature, manipulative, destructive, inconsiderate, and arrogant. One participant reflected that before TUMI, "I was all kinds of an addict, I stole, I used people, and I was selfish. And I did that all while in prison." Another said, "I was a selfish man thinking of no one else but me."

After TUMI, participants saw themselves in an entirely different light. One participant said she'd gone from seeing herself as:

> *A very mean and hateful person, especially towards myself" to "I am the person I now love more than I did before I came to jail, so I'm kinda glad that I did come to jail; I praise God for placing me in jail.*

And another participant realized that before TUMI and before becoming a Christian, "the Lord changed my heart and He implanted in me a love for his people," when before he was only concerned about himself.

Patterns of identity change were repeated frequently in our focus groups. One woman reflected that before TUMI, she had a very negative view of her personality, behavior, and relational style. She said:

> *I was a liar and a thief and an adultress. I didn't respect myself or my mom or my husband. I am now working my way back into a God-led life. My mother loves and is proud of me again. My husband respects me again, and most importantly, I respect myself. TUMI has changed me completely.*

One woman we interviewed reflected that prior to incarceration, she wasn't "into religion that much." She said, "I had a lot of pain and hatred in my heart. TUMI is teaching me to be a better person! It's bringing out my spiritual and religious beliefs and giving me a better perspective on life." Another participant said, "I was a blind man thinking he could see his way through life, but since I came to prison, Jesus has opened my eyes to a new light and with TUMI my vision is even more perfect." And one other shared how being a part of TUMI had changed his identity:

> *I was immature, frozen by insecurities, and had no faith in anything when I went to prison. God, through TUMI, the church, and others He placed in my path gave me a new identity and taught me to*

live in faith.

And another shared that prior to incarceration "I was cold, ignorant, self-centered, and naïve, giving little thought to anything beyond my immediate needs. Being involved in this program has opened my mind to concepts I had closed myself off to." One participant also shared how he's now better able to think through things before acting, commenting that "I'm now better at decision making, a good critical thinker. I now contribute to society and the Kingdom of God in a positive way."

A common belief among participants was that TUMI impacted their beliefs about themselves as a learner. They said that before TUMI, they judged themselves as incapable of learning at such a high level. They were concerned about TUMI's "college level" curriculum, given that many had "barely graduated high school" or did not excel academically. They felt that TUMI empowered them as learners, building confidence and academic self-efficacy well beyond their imaginations.

Theme 2: prosocial behavior

Another theme that captured the experiences of TUMI participants was related to prosocial behaviors. When asked to describe personal experiences with TUMI, one participant reflected on his newfound capacity for impulse control this way: "It's helping me think about life and people, in general, a lot more, helped me react to certain situations differently." Other participants described increases in self-regulation, especially in their ability to regulate drug and alcohol intake. Coping with drugs and alcohol was especially common among participants before participation in TUMI.

Several people talked about their ability to manage stress and difficult emotions which enabled them to cope more positively. One man we interviewed said:

> *Prior to coming to prison, I was a drug addict. I lived a self-centered life and caused a lot of pain to a lot of people. I was not a good man! Some would say I was evil! I made a total mess of my life even in the first ten years or so in prison. Once God came into my life and enrolling in TUMI, my life began to change. I have changed my way of dealing with life and I live my life accordingly.*

Another talked about his difficult emotions. He said:

> *Before prison it was about self, running from death with emotions that I didn't know how to balance. Anger was an emotion I felt comfortable with. Now anger is still a part of me, but it fuels my search for understanding conflict. Now my focus is on showing wisdom, love, and success in all I do.*

Participants discussed repeatedly how participation in TUMI effectively changed their behavior. They reported that TUMI provided a sense of purpose, meaning, self-worth, and community, which helped them turn from criminal activity. TUMI provided prisoners an avenue through which they could understand the extent of their actions, accept the consequences of their behavior, repent of those actions, and assess how they can make things right as they move forward in life.

Theme 3: prosocial relationships

The third theme that captured the experiences of TUMI participants was prosocial relationships. Participants described the compassion, social responsibility, restored relationships, and association with positive social groups they gained by participating in TUMI. When asked to describe how their interpersonal interactions were different after participation in TUMI, one participant felt that the fellowship and community support allowed him to change his perspective and his respect for others in surprising ways.

The social support found through participation in TUMI was a theme expressed repeatedly in their narratives. When we asked participants in focus groups and on the survey to tell us what they liked most about TUMI, for example, a man in a focus group, with tears in his eyes, said, "it's these brothers, these men right here in this room, who keep me going." The men around the table echoed, "Amen" in response. "I would not be here today if it weren't for these guys keeping me accountable and supporting me," another replied.

One man commented that before TUMI, he was a person who cared only about money. "My life was empty, and that's why I lost my family," but that now "TUMI has allowed me to better understand how to deal with people, and that has given a purpose to my life that I didn't have before." Another participant reflected that before prison, "I was a selfish person; it was always about me and what people could do for me. Now I'm learning how to invest in others."

Several participants described the sense of social responsibility they felt since participation in TUMI, with a new purpose and sense of call to "love people more." Participants reflected on how they were "a troublemaker and didn't care about anyone," but now they have a newfound compassion for others, a passion for serving others. One formerly incarcerated participant described a business he started to serve families who want to visit their loved ones in prison but don't have a means of transportation. In addition to working as a full-time master welder and a part-time property manager, he will operate a 15-passenger shuttle, complete with a wi-fi

connection, T.V. for entertainment, snacks for the kids, and more.

Patterns of changed family relationships were repeated in our focus groups. One man shared how his criminal behavior had effectually destroyed his relationship with his mother, which changed after TUMI participation:

> *TUMI helped me relate to people. I used to be very harsh towards people, very bitter, very angry about my current situation, and that used to affect people around me, making them angry and bitter also. TUMI allowed me to change my life, to change a lot of things. I've seen relationships mended with not only friends here in prison, by with my mother and stuff like that. That was a big deal and without TUMI, none of that was possible.*

Many participants reflected on their former selves as someone who "couldn't care less about anything or anyone, always lost, always destructive," but now, "I have grown into the man that my family and loved ones' respect. I am a great father and husband to my wife and kids and a leader to the people God places in my life." Another man reflected how his change in attitude has impacted relationships with his family and friends. "In the years I've been in TUMI I've noticed my anger dissipate, my attitude improved overall, my sense of peace and joy increase, and my relationship with my family and friends go stronger," he said.

Discussion

To deepen our understanding of the components of well-being and to explore the potential impact of participation in a theological education program during incarceration, we employed a mixed-methods approach with a sample of currently and formerly incarcerated men and women. While existing literature consistently demonstrates that incarcerated individuals tend to report low levels of well-being (Lo et al., 2020), our findings revealed a notable trend in which participants reported surprisingly high levels of well-being. This is particularly significant given the established association between elevated well-being and reduced recidivism (Pettus et al., 2021; Wallace & Wang, 2020).

Well-being

The importance of well-being during incarceration and the reentry process is well-documented in the literature (Jang et al., 2021; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; McLuhan et al., 2023; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Tweed et al., 2019), and the findings from our evaluation indicate that participants demonstrated notably high levels of well-being. Notably, formerly incarcerated individuals in our sample reported significantly higher well-being than those who were currently incarcerated. This outcome is especially significant given the well-established challenges of community reintegration. Upon release, individuals often encounter restrictive policies that govern where they can live and work, impede access to educational resources, and limit their ability to form and maintain meaningful social connections (Pettus et al., 2021). Despite these structural barriers, participants in our study sustained high levels of well-being post-release, suggesting that certain protective factors—such as those fostered through theological education and prosocial community—may play a critical role in supporting long-term psychological and emotional health.

One plausible explanation for the observed higher levels of well-being among formerly incarcerated participants is the enduring social support network and positive role models established during incarceration and sustained post-release. Upon reentry, individuals often face the loss of structured spiritual and moral accountability, encounter cultural norms that may promote amoral behavior, and navigate newfound autonomy in largely unregulated environments (Swanson, 2009). In this context, the presence of positive role models and a faith-based support system plays a critical role in facilitating successful reintegration. The sustained connections formed through participation in TUMI appear to have provided a stabilizing foundation that contributed to participants' continued well-being following release. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the pivotal role of sustained social support and prosocial networks in promoting psychological well-being and long-term reintegration success among formerly incarcerated individuals (Jang et al., 2018; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; Matthews, 2021).

Prosocial cognitions

Participants in our sample consistently reported that involvement in TUMI fostered the development of healthy thinking patterns, or prosocial cognitions, echoing the findings of Schaefer et al. (2016), who observed significant attitudinal changes following engagement in faith-based programming. Similar outcomes have been documented in related studies (Folk et al., 2016; Hanser et al., 2020; Moore & Shannon, 2022; Pettus et al., 2019; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019). Participant narratives reflected a marked transformation in self-perception and identity—shifting away from shame, self-centeredness, and hopelessness, and moving toward self-respect, agency, and a sense of purpose. Through the cultivation of a new identity as capable learners and valued contributors to a faith-based community, TUMI appears to support meaningful internal change. These cognitive and identity shifts are essential to the rehabilitative process and may serve

as a foundation for sustained desistance and positive social engagement both during incarceration and following release.

Prosocial behavior

Participants described noticeable changes in their behavioral patterns, reflecting a growing body of research that underscores the role of religious engagement in fostering prosocial behavior (Bozick et al., 2018; Brazzell & LaVigne, 2007; Duwe et al., 2015; Duwe & Johnson, 2013; Jang et al., 2018; Johnson, 2011, 2021; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Salvatore & Rubin, 2018). Their narratives suggest that participation in TUMI contributed to the development of prosocial coping strategies, enhanced emotional regulation, and increased self-awareness. These behavioral shifts not only signify meaningful personal growth but also align closely with the broader goals of rehabilitation, highlighting the program's potential to support long-term behavioral change and reduce the risk of recidivism.

Positive interpersonal relationships

Participant narratives in our evaluation consistently emphasized the significance of positive interpersonal relationships. While TUMI is structured as a rigorous academic program, it also fosters a strong sense of fellowship among participants. Social support is a core component of the program, facilitated through collaborative study networks and interactive classroom discussions. This community of care, acceptance, and accountability has the potential to reinforce healthy cognitive patterns, enhance psychological well-being, and promote the development of effective coping strategies (Collica, 2010; Duwe & King, 2012; Jang et al., 2021; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Roberts & Stacer, 2016; Willison et al., 2011)—all of which are critical for successful reintegration following incarceration (Bozick et al., 2018; Courtney, 2019; Dodson et al., 2011; Esperian, 2010; Nally et al., 2012). Most respondents identified positive interpersonal relationships as a central strength of the TUMI program. Their reflections highlight the pivotal role of prosocial relationships in the rehabilitative process. Through TUMI's communal structure, participants experienced meaningful emotional support and accountability, while also cultivating empathy, social responsibility, and relational healing—factors that may contribute significantly to sustained desistance from crime.

Congruent with an extensive body of research on the effectiveness of programs that target well-being and behavior, our findings suggest that there is much to be gained from correctional higher education that addresses these factors in terms of promoting long-term outcomes (Kjellstrand et al., 2021). These findings contribute to our understanding of effective prison rehabilitation programs linking faith-based educational programs to mental health and well-being (Bozick et al., Courtney, 2019; Esperian, 2010; Kjellstrand et al., 2021; Kyprianides & Easterbrook, 2020; Lo et al., 2020; Luke et al., 2021; Nally et al., 2012; Pettus et al., 2021; Rosenfeld & Grigg, 2022; Semenza & Grosholz, 2019; Wallace & Wang, 2020) and provide further support to the assertion that correctional education participants have higher rates of well-being than nonparticipants, which is associated with improved behavior inside prison and upon returning to the community (Duwe & Johnson, 2013; Duwe & King, 2012; Eytan, 2011; Roberts & Stacer, 2016).

Conclusions

Future evaluation of prison-based educational programs might consider comparing perspectives of well-being among inmates who did and did not participate, matched on key variables (e.g., age, race, disciplinary referrals, sentence length). Finding such a comparison group was complicated by the fact that TUMI candidates must maintain specific behavioral criteria for acceptance and continued participation in the program. Thus, those among the general prison population would not be directly comparable to the men women participating in TUMI, as many may not have met these criteria.

This study has several strengths. First, it utilized data from a sizeable sample of TUMI students ($n = 266$). Second, it gathered data from currently and formerly incarcerated students so that comparisons could be made across groups, unlike studies that relied upon data from formerly incarcerated participants only (e.g., Duwe & King, 2012; Roberts & Stacer, 2016). Third, it relied on data that was both qualitative and quantitative. And fourth, data were collected from several diverse geographical locations, much like Moore and Shannon (2022) and Kjellstrand et al. (2021), and unlike previous research focused on participants in just one location (Collica, 2010; Duwe & King, 2012; Lo et al., 2020; Luke et al., 2021; Swanson, 2009). To our knowledge, no previous study of well-being among incarcerated individuals has utilized a mixed-methods approach with such a large sample of participants from diverse groups.

Several limitations that limit the study's generalizability should be noted. First, this study drew on a purposive sample and was non-experimental in nature. The lack of a randomized controlled trial prevents causal relationships from being drawn between the intervention and well-being outcomes. Secondly, it was not possible to measure improvements to well-being in our evaluation, given that the researchers were brought in to evaluate the program after it had already been implemented, rendering us unable to complete a pre- and

post-intervention measurement. Finally, it was virtually impossible to form comparison groups of matched individuals not enrolled in TUMI, giving our limited access to the larger prison population. Generalization is only possible to the population from which the sample was drawn (TUMI participants), and findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of incarcerated men and women.

Participation in TUMI appears to meaningfully contribute to individual well-being. As noted in the literature, individuals with higher levels of well-being are better equipped to manage the psychological and practical challenges associated with incarceration and reentry (Bozick et al., 2018; Courtney, 2019; Dodson et al., 2011; Duwe et al., 2015; Esperian, 2010; Kjellstrand, 2021; Nally et al., 2012; Pettus et al., 2021; Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Roberts & Stacer, 2016). Our findings lend further support to the growing body of evidence suggesting that faith-based correctional education can enhance well-being—a factor closely associated with improved institutional behavior, reduced disciplinary infractions, and greater preparedness for post-release success. Overall, this study underscores the potential value of offering robust educational programs such as TUMI within correctional settings to promote both personal transformation and community reintegration.

Footnotes
No footnotes were used in this manuscript.

Authors' contributions
RL wrote the entire manuscript.

Author's information
No author information to provide.

Funding
The author of this manuscript declares no funding sources in the conceptualization, design, data collection, analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available to ensure complete anonymity of incarcerated participants and formerly incarcerated participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
The manuscript reported research involving human participants and was approved by the Biola University's Institutional Review Board (called the Protection of Human Rights in Research Committee or PHRRC) prior to commencement of said research, approved by Protocol #S22-006 dated 2/9/22, and the research was conducted in accordance with The Belmont Report. All participants signed informed consent forms indicating their consent to participate in group interviews and to complete quantitative and qualitative surveys. No animal or human data or tissue was collected during this research.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 4 February 2025 Accepted: 3 May 2025
Published online: 13 May 2025

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