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And Still We are Not Free: The School-Prison Nexus in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education are presented as vital pathways to economic mobility, particularly for working class, first generation, and students of color. Yet the inequitable outcomes produced by post-secondary institutions suggest structures and systems of exclusion and enclosure. In this critical mixed methods case study, we explore the relationship between the mission-driven claims of access/opportunity and the carceral functioning of colleges and universities. To do so, we draw on frameworks of the prison industrial complex (PIC), school-prison nexus (SPN), and abolitionist analyses to analyze publicly available documents from a mid-sized urban community college district, documents that detail critical contradictions between mission, practice, and outcomes. Our findings reveal investment in security and surveillance over student support, normalized and racialized academic failure, and the criminalization of common forms of campus political protest. These findings suggest the force and extent of the school-prison nexus – a framework typically applied to Pk-12 schools – in one mid-sized urban community college district, and, by extension, in colleges and universities more generally. This work is significant (1) for its novel contribution to theorizing extensions of the school-prison nexus in higher education and (2) the concrete, empirical data we offer detailing the functioning of this nexus.

'With affordable, 21st century academic and workforce preparedness programs, [Metropolitan Colleges of the Midwest (MCM)] [are] helping residents across the city build the skills necessary to reach their full potential,' said Mayor [name]. 'The talented, passionate faculty and staff at [MCM] are helping better position students for success in the fast-growing industries bringing jobs to our city.'

The [MCM] graduation rate has steadily risen over the past seven years, growing from 11% points in 2011 to 22.9% points to date in 2018.

'We are working to ensure all [city] residents who come through our doors find success and the path to upward mobility,' said [MCM] Chancellor [name]. 'The continued growth in our graduation rate is testament to the hard work of our faculty, staff, and students and efforts to eliminate any barriers in on our students' road to completion.'

This entire epigraph is one direct quotation from the press release. All 3 paragraphs are as written in the press release with the exception of changing full quotation marks in the text ["] to single quotation marks to indicate direct quotations within the larger direct quotation.

—Mayor and Metropolitan Colleges of the Midwest Announce Record High 22.9% Graduation Rate. *MCM press release*, July 5, 2018

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Opportunity for all? Examining carceral schooling beyond PK-12

Community colleges are presented as open pathways to educational opportunity and economic mobility and yet attrition rates are nearly 70% overall with rates for Black students closer to 75% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Rather than openness, access, and opportunity, these outcomes indicate racial and institutional exclusion (Wilson, 2021), enclosure (Sojoyner, 2016), and failures to operationalize missions predicated on opportunity, access, and public service (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Purpose and argument

We offer a critical mixed methods case study (Bishop, 2018; Flyvbjerg et al., 2012; Pasque et al., 2017) of a mid-sized urban community college district we call Metropolitan Colleges of the Midwest or MCM using publicly available data (including budgets, salary records, outcome data, and campus equity and emergency plans) to compare these colleges' explicit commitment to access and opportunity with their investments in surveillance, security, and enclosure. We argue that a school-prison nexus or SPN (similar to what many refer to as the school-to-prison pipeline) is enacted well beyond PK-12 schools in and through higher education. In fact, college students' positioning as no longer entitled to free public education or to legal and economic protections afforded minors (Gardner, 2010), combined with the growing financial costs of post-secondary education, mean that struggles and failures in college can have particularly pernicious economic, psychological, and social repercussions (DeLuca et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). In effect, these structures harden students' confinement in community colleges and higher education more generally as blame for poor outcomes is individualized, normalized, and "placed" on students (Gardner, 2011). We provide concrete evidence of the presence of these punitive and confining dynamics via analysis of MCM's (1) budgets and spending – particularly investments in security, surveillance, and policing over instruction, advising, and student services, (2) reporting of and (3) responses to student outcome data – including in campus equity plans, mission statements, and public comments by MCM leaders and the Metro City Mayor, and (4) policies for responding to widely accepted forms of student political protest – as described in campus security plans. We argue that collectively, these demonstrate a focus on surveilling and correcting students rather than altering institutional policies to better ensure positive outcomes for students. We suggest that such punitive and confining carceral logics in educational institutions predicated on openness and social mobility aggravate students' struggles in college and thereby reify existing social, educational, racial, and economic inequalities. In short, we argue that despite espousing a mission of openness and educational opportunity, publicly available data help reveal how MCM is enacting educational confinement and exclusion in ways that reproduce the logics of prisons and imprisonment.

Need

While extensive research documents school-to-prison pipelines and the school-prison nexus in PK-12 schools (e.g., Hall, 2020; Mallett, 2016; Meiners, 2007; Nocella et al., 2018; Novak, 2018), limited research explores these dynamics in higher education in general and community colleges in particular (Wilson, 2021; Castro & Magana, 2020; Johnson & Dizon, 2021; Raza, 2018).

In what follows, we address the following research questions:

(1) (How) is the SPN evident in a community college that purports to be open to all? Specifically, do publicly available data – including budgets, staffing, equity, and violence prevention plans – point to the presence of the SPN?
(2) How do we move toward ruptures of the nexus and abolitionist futures in higher education?

Implications

In 2014, more than 40% of all undergraduate students in the U.S. were enrolled in community colleges and nearly half (46%) of all students who completed degrees at four-year institutions in 2013–2014 had previously enrolled in community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016). Our research has important implications given that college in general and community colleges in particular are positioned as ladders of opportunity. In fact, our findings point to fundamental contradictions between discourses of openness and policies of enclosure, access and completion, opportunity and exclusion, and support and precarity. Our work highlights these contradictions as indicative of extensions of the school-prison nexus into and through higher education. Our work is significant (1) for its novel contribution to theorizing extensions of the school-prison nexus in post-secondary education as well as (2) for the concrete empirical data we offer to illustrate the power and functioning of this nexus.

Literature review: The school-prison nexus and postsecondary education

In this section we (1) highlight a significant gap in research regarding the relationships between schools and prisons – namely how these dynamics function in colleges and universities, and (2) briefly review key findings in this "nascent area of study" (Johnson & Dizon, 2021, p. 12)—in particular how institutions of higher education can function literally and metaphorically as sites of enclosure, exclusion, precarity, and educational and economic confinement (Wilson, 2021; Davis, 2011; Johnson & Dizon, 2021; Raza, 2018; Sojoyner, 2016). We draw on Althusser's (2006) distinction between *hard* or *coercive* and *soft* or *ideological* power to explore how both uphold the school-prison nexus. In the context of higher education, hard or coercive power is apparent in walls, fences, barricades, closed/locked campuses (including campuses of "public" institutions), presence of police and security personnel, surveillance systems, etc. while soft or ideological power is exercised more subtly via limiting availability of advising and counseling, individualization of both achievement and blame, racialized monitoring and surveillance, placement tests and non-credit "developmental" classes that erect barriers to first-generation and racial minority students success, rising tuition, decreasing financial aid, etc.

Highlighting this gap in research, Johnson and Dizon (2021) write that "the college-prison nexus is meant to bring to the field's attention an *overlooked and understudied phenomenon*," and that "research at the intersection of carcerality and higher education *is in its nascent stage*" (p. 6, emphasis added). They note that investigating the college/prison nexus "may be challenging due to the present lack of data," that there are "few public datasets available," and that "researchers will need to navigate bureaucratic hurdles to compile existing data" (p. 12). They conclude on a note of urgency calling for "future research [to] fill a needed gap in our understanding of the extension of the carceral state" and the "continued work [to] dismantle structural inequalities in higher education" (p. 13).

This "gap in understanding of the extension of the carceral state" may be especially urgent at community colleges given that community colleges enroll nearly half of all US undergraduate students. Focusing specifically on this segment of US higher education, Raza (2018) describes community colleges and prisons as "similar institutions that absorb and manage displaced workers, economic refugees, and dispossessed adult populations" (p. 15) arguing that "these two seemingly distinctive institutions [colleges and prisons] work together to subvert individual and collective desires for self-determination through policies and pedagogies that institutionalize discouragement and emotional management" (p. iv). Raza points out that "working class adults [. . .] participate in higher education in the context of precarity and incarceration – literally and figuratively" (p. iv) and emphasizes that despite "carrying past and present traumas related to school" participants in her study "view community college as the one remaining institution designed to help them remake their lives" (p. 2).

Unlike many middle-class peers and even some of "the privileged poor" (Jack, 2019) at elite residential colleges, many students at community colleges pursue post-secondary education while engaged in daily struggles to secure basic survival needs like housing, food, and care for themselves

and their families (DeLuca et al., 2016; Kolesnikova, 2009). Sara Goldrick-Rab (2016) writes that despite being viewed as key ladders of economic mobility, "community college, an institution most think of as free, is no longer actually free" as "students from families earning an average of just $20,000 a year are required to pay at least $8,000 [i.e., 40% of their family's income] for a year of community college" (Goldrick-Rab, 2016, p. 4). Couple these challenges with racialized imposter syndrome and the weight of accumulated educational disadvantage from attending under-resourced public elementary and high schools, and students can begin to feel diminished academic confidence, as if "I don't belong in college" or college is "for other people" (Freeman et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Theoretical framework

Three interconnected frameworks guide this study: (1) conceptualizations of the Prison Industrial Complex or PIC (Critical Resistance, 2021; Davis, 2011; Gilmore, 2007) and (2) frameworks that draw specific attention to the ways that schools operate within a racialized school-prison nexus or SPN (Meiners, 2007; Rodriguez, 2008; Stovall, 2018; Wun, 2016). Both the PIC and SPN offer conceptual, historical, and contemporary framings of educational enclosure (Sojoyner, 2016) and miseducation (Kelley, 2002; Patel, 2021; Sojoyner, 2016). Finally, we draw on (3) frameworks of rupture (Sojoyner, 2016) and school abolition (Stovall, 2018) to offer alternatives to carcerality in higher education. We connect these frameworks by exploring community colleges as ideological systems whose educational missions and histories display deep entanglements with prisons and policing, as findings detail below.

Prison industrial complex (PIC)

To frame the broad web of carceral logics that shape lives and opportunities for many dispossessed or "surplus" (Gilmore, 2007; Raza, 2018) populations, we borrow from literature on the PIC (Critical Resistance, 2021; Davis, 2011; Gilmore, 2007). In defining the PIC, Critical Resistance (2021) writes, "The prison industrial complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" (n.p.). They continue:

> Through its reach and impact, the PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic, and other privileges. There are many ways this power is collected and maintained through the PIC, including [...] images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, and other oppressed communities as criminal, delinquent, or deviant *(n.p.)*.

We use the PIC to frame the context of surveillance and punishment (Foucault, 1979) that exists, both implicitly and explicitly, in formal educational spaces like MCM. Additionally, we draw from the intersectional analysis of the PIC's racialized (and gendered, classist, and ableist) dynamics as these exist in institutions of higher education. Like the enclosure of the PIC, these can be contradictory. But, as we argue below, ultimately they contribute to the individualization of failure, access, and success, the reification of inequality and educational exclusion, and the maintenance and expansion of the SPN.

School-prison nexus (SPN)

A growing body of research (e.g., Meiners, 2007; Rodriguez, 2008; Stovall, 2018; Wun, 2016) points to the ways that schools operate within the PIC. While most of these studies situate the SPN within PK-12 environments, literature on the PIC reminds us that the logics of prisons exist beyond the confines of PK-12 schooling. Meiners (2007) argues that "schools and prisons are less a pipeline, more a persistent nexus or a web [...]. *Nexus* [...] is more accurate as it captures the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of the intersections of education and incarceration" (pp. 31–32, emphasis added). This articulation of the school-prison nexus frames our exploration of the ways that community colleges

in particular and higher education in general can function as an ideological prison, particularly when blame is personalized and failure normalized as historically excluded students are contained and pushed out. We use this framing of the school-prison nexus to analyze the carceral processes and policies in higher education, specifically as these are revealed at MCM.

School abolition

Stovall (2018) asks, "are ready for school abolition?," calling on "age-old practices invoked by oppressed peoples across the planet to claim liberation from the tyranny of white supremacy, colonialism, imperialism and other forms of state sanctioned violence" (Stovall, 2018, p. 53) as methods and frameworks that can help dismantle carceral conditions in schools. We draw on the work of abolitionists, social movement organizers, and organizations struggling to build a more just world free of prisons and the logics of surveillance and punishment that bound prisons, to explore the ways in which colleges often fail to deliver on promises of openness, access, and opportunity – especially for minoritized and historically excluded students. Kaba (2020) defines abolition as "a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: Food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more. Things that are foundational to our personal and community safety" (p. 2). Abolition provides us with a liberatory framework to both imagine and analyze the conditions that can both enable and dismantle the school-prison nexus in higher education. In this study, we use the framework of school abolition to both locate possibilities in the data we collected and to begin to imagine ways to support a larger fracturing of carceral logics in other college and university spaces.

Combined, these frameworks provide the analytical lenses to examine contradictions between mission and outcomes at MCM, suggest broader contradictions and carceral logics across higher education, and begin to conceptualize ruptures that can promote access, opportunity, student well-being, healing, and recapture higher education's liberatory and empowering promise.

Methodology

This study employs a critical mixed methods case study methodology (Bishop, 2018; Flyvbjerg et al., 2012; Pasque et al., 2017) to investigate the SPN at MCM. Critical case study describes both method and analytic approach – research "at the nexus of social science and policy analysis" (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012, p. 3) that can offer novel empirical and theoretical insights into the "ineliminable presence of power" (p. 2) in (educational) institutions and public policy discourses. Critical case study research has yielded important insights into what Bishop (2018) describes as "antiblackness" in the "geography" of education pathways (p. ii). These include new empirical documentation and theoretical refinements of "the interstices of the historical, socio-political, and economic implications of race on campus" (Pasque et al., 2017, p. 76). Applied to higher education, critical case study methodology offers the opportunity (1) to empirically investigate "pervasive" issues impacting historically excluded students, faculty, and staff, (2) within the context of a "bounded case (including [specific] organizational decisions, structures, and policies)," and (3) to "inspire transformative visions of the academy" (p. 76).

Mixed methods describes our attempts to capture and analyze both quantitative data – budgets, salary scales, graduation and attrition rates, campus crime statistics, etc., as well as qualitative data – including mission statements, diversity and equity statements, campus safety and emergency plans, etc. We focus on data from 2019–2020 (the most recent information available from MCM) but we also draw on earlier data and secondary analyses of trends over time (i.e., investigations and audits by local news media, city and state government reports, and governmental accountability organizations). A mixed methods analysis of quantitative and qualitative data allowed us to investigate how institutional rhetoric from mission statements and equity plans is actualized (or not) in budgets, policies/ practices, and outcomes. Employing mixed methods in the context of a critical case study offered the opportunity for both specific, local empirical analysis including triangulation across data streams as

well as conceptual triangulation and broader extension of findings via secondary data sets and analyses. In other words, taking a critical mixed methods case study approach provided multiple points of access to "the reality of the condition of education for minoritized students" in the particularity of the MCM case, as well as the conceptual architecture to "acknowledge and challenge neoliberalism, academic capitalism, [. . .] the marketization of higher education [. . .] and [to begin to] offer intentional models for [institutional and] social change" (Pasque et al., 2017, p. 77) in higher education more broadly.

Data sources

We reviewed and analyzed publicly available data from the 2020–21 academic year including MCM mission statements, budget and expenditure reports, campus Clery Act reports, campus Equity Plans, campus Strategic Plans, and campus Security and Emergency Preparedness Plans. We also searched for reporting on MCM in local news outlets. To provide context, as well suggest the urgency and significance of our findings, we compared local findings with national data sets (i.e., U.S. Department of Education, Bureau of Justice Statistics, College Board). We located all sources online via Google search.

Context

Metropolitan Colleges of the Midwest (MCM) is a community college serving approximately 70,000 students during the 2019–2020 academic year (MCM FY 20 Statistical Digest, 2021) across seven primary campuses (and four satellite campuses). As shown in Table 1, racial demographics differ markedly across MCM's campuses, reflecting deep histories of racial segregation across the Metro City region.

Despite pronounced racial differences across campuses, MCM claims to be an equitable institution. Their mission reads (in part):

> We [. . .] provid[e] a broad range of quality, affordable courses, programs, and services to prepare students for success in a technologically advanced and increasingly interdependent global society. *We work proactively to eliminate barriers* to employment and *to address and overcome casual factors underlying socio-economic disparities and inequities of access and graduation in higher education* (MCM Mission, emphasis added).

Analysis

Our quantitative data analysis proceeded by comparing MCM's allocations and spending on "public safety," "campus security," and "surveillance and access systems" with allocations and spending on instruction and student support. We gathered payroll and salary data to compare investments in security with investments in instruction and student support. We also analyzed student outcome

Table 1. Fiscal year 2020 race and ethnicity of MCM students (total and percentage).

Campus	Latinx	Black	White	Asian	Haw/ Pac. Islander	Native Am.	Multi-Rac (non-Latinx)	Not Specified
H	4999 (43.8%)	3181 (27.8%)	1581 (13.8%)	1062 (9.3%)	0.1%	0.2%	375 (3.3%)	199 (1.7%)
D	8788 (74%)	1324 (11.2%)	1167 (9.8%)	131 (1.1%)	0.1%	0.1%	79 (0.7%)	361 (3%)
K	626 (13.7%)	3585 (78.6%)	141 (3.09%)	22 (0.48%)	0.1%	9 (0.2%)	112 (2.46%)	64 (1.4%)
M	5178 (46.1%)	4058 (36.1%)	943 (8.4%)	529 (4.71%)	0.1%	0.1%	232 (2.1%)	273 (2.43%)
T	4769 (42.1%)	2313 (20.4%)	2167 (19.1%)	1743 (15.3%)	0.1%	0.2%	195 (1.7%)	129 (1.14%)
W	9636 (61.2%)	877 (5.6%)	3663 (23.3%)	1092 (6.94%)	0.2%	0.1%	283 (1.8%)	147 (0.93%)
O	960 (21.4%)	2984 (66.5%)	158 (3.5%)	70 (1.56%)	0.1%	0.2%	120 (2.7%)	182 (4.06%)

Source: MCM Interactive Statistical Database, FY 2020.

data – notably by comparing graduation and attrition rates across racially distinct campuses, across racial groups at MCM, and by comparing MCM's aggregated student outcome data with both regional and national data on student outcomes in community colleges.

Our qualitative data analysis began by searching for mentions of key terms relevant to the SPN and PIC in MCM board meeting minutes and the most recent MCM strategic plan, as well as in individual campus strategic plans, Clery Act reports, equity plans, and security and emergency preparedness plans. All these were available via MCM and individual campus websites, though often they were difficult to locate. Within these documents, we searched for mentions of "safety," "security," "surveillance," "punishment," "discipline," "crime," "police," "prison," "jail," and "crime." We used ATLAS.ti (qualitative data analysis software) to expedite keyword searches. We tracked, organized, and analyzed relevant codes for what they might reveal about the discursive construction and institutionalization of exclusion, surveillance, and enclosure in the context of missions predicated on openness, access, and opportunity. We present some of our most generative themes and findings below.

Positionality

All coauthors had relationships with the study site. One of us was an administrator at MCM at the time of the study, while the other coauthors served as consultants on a separate research project. We all hold an intimate closeness to the site, privy to knowledges, dispositions, and interactions – including some not otherwise easily discerned in the data we collected. In this research setting, we position ourselves as both insiders and outsiders. While not named as data sources of this study, our experiences certainly influenced the ways that we examined the data and the hunches developed during coding. While some may view this as a potential source of bias, we see these unique positionalities, like most critical interpretive researchers, as avenues to richer and thicker analyses (Merriam, 1998).

Findings and implications

Our findings help illustrate the presence of the nexus beyond PK-12 schooling and reveal critical contradictions between mission and practice at MCM that harden its power.

Specific findings include:

- MCM invests heavily in security over student support and academics
- MCM's reporting of and responses to student outcomes normalize failure and devolve blame to students rather than attending to institutional policies and priorities that directly shape student success
- MCM campus equity plans default to individual correction and remediation over institutional change
- MCM campus emergency plans risk criminalizing standard forms of political speech and nonviolent protest – effectively foreclosing a key avenue for students to respond to and push back against carceral policies and priorities

We describe each finding followed by a brief discussion – including questions to encourage readers to consider how and if the kinds of carceral logics we highlight (racial and institutional exclusion, enclosure, surveillance, emphasis on order and compliance, failures to operationalize missions built on openness and opportunity) may be present at their own colleges, universities, and PK-12 schools. Our goal is not to generalize beyond the specifics of what our data warrant, but rather to invite readers to consider findings in the context of their experiences in education, particularly higher education. We invite readers to consider whether, as students, faculty, staff, etc., they have experienced similar structures, policies, and institutional rationalizations. Framing concrete empirical findings in the context of questions about "relevance to practice," can offer what Gutiérrez and Penuel (2014, p. 19) argue is a strategy for increasing rigor in educational research. Our questions constitute

invitations to consider whether findings help reveal the ideological force of framing higher education primarily in terms of individual educational opportunity rather than institutional exclusion and enclosure.

MCM's budgets and staffing prioritize security over academics and student support

MCM invests heavily in security. This is true both in absolute terms and when compared with expenditures in areas like academics, student support, faculty salaries, advisors, and wellness center staff.

In absolute terms, MCM's fiscal year 2021 budget allocates $1.82 million (or 6.27% of its annual capital expenditures) to campus security/"surveillance and access systems" (MCM "FY 2021 Annual Operating Budget," p. 45) as compared to $1 million (or 3.6% of FY 2021 capital budget) allocated to "mechanical systems," "environmental and compliance systems," and "electrical systems" combined. But MCM's investments in security are even more troubling when compared with investments in student support and academics. For example, MCM's "Employee Salary Compensation Report" (MCM, 2021), along with salary data available from the Metropolitan City Council or MCC (resolution R2020–806), indicate that at an annual wage of $29,520, a part-time security officer makes approximately twice (2.17 times) the average salary of a part-time faculty member (MCM Salary Report, 2021; MCC minutes, 2020). Furthermore, MCM faculty salaries are "not at all competitive with other community colleges," notably whiter suburban community colleges (MCC resolution R2020–806, 2020, p. 2), a fact that reflects and exacerbates the long history of intense segregation across the Metro City region.

Investments in security over student support are also apparent when comparing payroll expenditures by departments. According to an independent governmental accountability agency's analysis of payroll data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the top spending departments at MCM are (1) adult education, (2) English, (3) mathematics, followed by (4) security and (5) advising and transition ([Independent Government Accountability Agency], State Public Salaries Database, 2021). Several things are notable here. First, MCM spends heavily on departments (adult education, English, and mathematics) that offer the most non-credit, developmental education and GED classes—i.e., classes that do not count toward an MCM degree (despite requiring students to pay full tuition). Second, MCM's security payroll makes security the fourth largest "department" at MCM (behind adult education, English, and math and ahead of advising)—suspect and arguably skewed priorities for an institution dedicated to access and opportunity. And third, MCM's payroll expenditures on security are higher than "100% of other police departments in [the state's] higher education category," while the department's median salary is "higher than 25% of other police departments in [the state's] higher education category" ([Independent Government Accountability Agency], State Public Salaries Database, 2021, n.p.). These figures (highest absolute expenditure on campus policing alongside low median salaries for officers) suggest that alongside low faculty salaries, MCM – which serves the metro area with the highest concentration of minoritized students in the state – maintains a much larger force of less well-paid (and presumably less well-qualified and trained) security officers than Whiter colleges and universities across the state.

MCM's investments in security over student well-being are even more troubling when comparing both the absolute numbers of academic support staff to security staff and when comparing the relative distribution of security to academic support personnel across MCM campuses (see Table 2 below). In absolute terms, MCM employs 429 security officers, 95 advisers, and 13 Wellness Center staff across all its campuses (MCM 2021 "Employee Salary Compensation Report;" MCM 2021 campus Advising Department webpages; MCM 2021 campus Wellness Center directories), meaning that MCM employs nearly five security personnel for every one advisor and, even more alarming, 33 security personnel for every one wellness center employee.

The extent to which these expenditures are racialized, and the geographical, demographic, and institutional structuring of minoritized students' educational containment and anti-Blackness are

Table 2. MCM security personnel to academic support staff (all campuses), highlighting racial composition of campuses.

MCM campuses with relative racial composition	Number of security officers	Number of advisors	Number of Wellness Center staff	Ratio of security to advisors	Ratio of security to wellness center staff	Ratio of security to advisors and wellness center staff combined
H	28	20	1	1.4	28	
D-highest % of Latinx students	82	11	1	7.5	**82.0**	6.8
K-highest % of Black students	80	10	1	**8.0**	**80.0**	**7.3**
M	63	14	3	4.5	21.0	
T-Highest % of White students	52	13	4	4.0	13.0	3.1
W-2nd highest % of White students	42	21	1	2.0	42.0	1.9
O-2nd highest % of Black students	82	6	2	**13.7**	41.0	**10.3**
	429	**95**	**13**	**4.5**	**33.0**	**4.0**

Sources: MCM 2021 "Employee Salary Compensation Report," MCM 2021 campus Advising Department webpages, MCM 2021 campus Wellness Center directories

striking when considering these numbers in terms of the demographics of MCM's campuses. For example, MCM's campus with the highest concentration of Black students employs 80 security officers and only 10 advisors. This compares with 42 security officers and 21 advisors at the MCM campus with the highest concentration of White students – in other words, roughly half as many security officers and more than twice as many advisors at the "Whiter" campus.

These expenditures for security over academics and student support indicate racialized hyper-surveillance and racialized disinvestment that run directly counter to MCM's mission of "work[ing] proactively [...] to address and overcome casual factors underlying [...] inequities of access and graduation in higher education" (MCM Mission, 2021). This leads us to question why focus on security rather than on academics and student and faculty support? What is being supported at MCM? Is it students' learning and well-being or the school-prison nexus?

Graduation, attrition, and degree/certificate completion at MCM

MCM reports that 24% of students who enrolled in the Fall of 2016 graduated within 3 years (MCM Interactive Statistical Database [ISD], 2020). Looking specifically at degrees and certificates awarded reveals even more starkly the normalization of student enclosure and its disproportionate racialized impacts. In fiscal year 2020, MCM enrolled 69,496 students across seven campuses and awarded 9,730 degrees and certificates (MCM ISD, 2020, p. 2). That is, MCM awarded approximately 1 certificate or degree for every 7 students enrolled. However, of the 9,730 degrees and certificates awarded, more than half (54%; *n* = 5,280) were basic credentials *below the associate's degree* (MCM ISD, 2020, p. 2). Disaggregating outcomes by race is even more troubling. MCM enrolled 18,024 Black students in 2020 but granted Black students only 2,260 degrees, or approximately 1 degree or certificate for every 8 black students enrolled (MCM ISD, 2020, p. 3). And of the degrees and certificates granted Black students, *nearly two thirds* (65.9%; *n* = 1,490) *were below the associate's degree* (i.e., GEDs – General Equivalency Degrees, GECCs – General Education Core Curriculum Degrees, and BCs – Basic Certificates). By comparison, 0.1% (*n* = 3) of degrees and certificates awarded to Black students in 2020 were Associate of Engineering Science (MCM ISD, 2020, p. 3)—a degree that provides a gateway to lucrative jobs.

Looking closely at MCM's outcome data highlights both the normalization of student containment *and* starkly disproportionate racial outcomes, both of which bear striking similarities to U.S. prisons. For example, MCM's three-year graduation rate (24%) suggests a three-year attrition rate of 76%. By comparison, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports a three-year recidivism rate of 66% among inmates leaving U.S. prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS],

2021). This means that the rate of institutional "failure" is *higher* at MCM than it is in the U.S. prison system. And, like U.S. mass incarceration, MCM's institutional "failure" disproportionately impacts minoritized students, with the most punitive and incapacitating effects on Black students.

"Institutional equity" at MCM

MCM's campus equity plans demonstrate awareness that student struggles are often rooted in racialized and institutionalized structural inequities – food and housing insecurity, poverty, uneven and segregated access to adequate PK-12 education, etc. (e.g., T Campus Equity Plan, 2020, p. 27). But, like prisons, MCM's equity plans maintain a remedial and correctional focus that ultimately individualizes responsibility and blame when students struggle (Foucault, 1979).

For example, just below a table showing that nearly 50% of MCM's faculty (46%) and administrators (45%) are White, one campus Equity Plan lists "key takeaways." These include: (1) "Black students have low rates of fall-to-spring retention and credential completion compared to White [] students," (2) "Black and Latinx [] students consistently have low rates of taking in passing college level English and math courses compared to white [] students," (3) "Faculty and staff lack the tools and training needed to address diversity and equity issues in curriculum and program planning," (4) "Students do not always feel [campus name] provides an opening and welcoming campus," and (5) "Students face insecurity in meeting their basic needs" (T Campus Equity Plan, 2020, p. 27). Note that the subjects in four of these five sentences are the students themselves (explicitly racialized in takeaways #1 and 2). Takeaway #3 similarly individualizes responsibility and personalizes a need for correction and remediation – in this case, blaming faculty and staff who "lack[] the tools . . . needed to address equity issues" (T Equity Plan, 2020, p. 27) rather than addressing the institutionalized antecedents and potential causes of such shortcomings—e.g., lack of faculty and administrators of color who might be more equipped to help students address such equity issues, lack of training and support for instructors, lack of support for student learning and well-being.

In discussing low Black student retention (takeaway #1 above), the equity plan states that "some of the reasons [for Black student attrition] . . . *lie in students*" (emphasis added). This individualizes and devolves blame. Similarly, when discussing Black and Latinx students' low passing rates in passing English and math classes (takeaway #2 above), the equity plan states that "many of these students enter college unprepared for college-level work," something it ascertains through "EarlyAlert systems" and "GradesFirst" software that track individual students' grades and attendance (T Equity Plan, 2020, p. 29). In other words, explanations for low student retention and grades are individualized and racialized, explained in terms of *shortcomings of individual (Black and Latinx) students' themselves* and implying a need for racialized remediation and correction rather than reconsidering affirmative institutional policies and responses that could make success, opportunity, and completion more likely for historically excluded groups.

In what may be the clearest and most direct indication of the threatening power of the college's security apparatus, T's campus equity plan states that focus groups and survey results "indicate[] that our students do not always feel welcomed by security staff" and that T "needs to do better in providing a safe [] campus for all students" (T Equity Plan, 2020, p. 31). By acknowledging the presence and negative impacts of what we argue are carceral policies, T's equity plan demonstrates both that those logics continue to be enforced and that they continue to negatively impact student well-being and success.

Who is to blame when MCM students struggle and are pushed out of higher education? Like prisons, MCM defaults to correction, remediation, and to fixing people, not to addressing the structures and systems that harm people.

Carceral vigilance and the production of threat: MCM's campus security and emergency plans

MCM is a public community college. Its mission statements describe a commitment to civic engagement and the development of students as civic leaders (for example, a commitment to "developing a diverse community of cultural and civic leaders . . . to advance progressive . . . citizenship"—O campus Mission Statement, 2021—or to "serv[ing] with urgency as a catalyst for social change [in Metro City]"—M campus Mission Statement, 2021). Despite these commitments, MCM campus security and emergency plans call for forcible intervention in the case of campus protests or student demonstrations and rhetorically (and potentially literally) risk escalating political protest into the realm of "emergency" and "violence." In this way, MCM's policies risk criminalizing accepted forms of student organizing (e.g., sit ins, teach ins, strikes) as well as nonviolent political protest (e.g., marches, rallies). For example, MCM's "All Hazards Campus Emergency Plan and Violence Prevention Plan" states that MCM security officers *and metro police* are to be summoned "if demonstrations interfere with normal operations of the college" or "prevent access to offices and other college facilities" (MCM All Hazards Campus Emergency Plan and Violence Prevention Plan, 2021, p. 41). These policies suggest a carceral vigilance on the part of MCM administration and security. The rhetorical escalation of campus protest into the realm of potential "violence" and "emergency" at an urban community college with a racialized student body arguably contributes to rather than diminishes a climate of suspicion and fear on MCM campuses, a dynamic Noguera (1995) documents in K-12 schooling when he asks whether prison-like school safety measures (guards, metal detectors, security cameras, police) *prevent* or paradoxically *produce* violence. By curtailing legitimate avenues to institutional and political redress and invoking emergency, violence, and policing as apparently normal or reasonable responses, such policies illustrate a convergence of "hard" and "soft power" (Althusser, 2006) and further exemplify the extent the SPN at MCM.

From an abolitionist perspective, it is both necessary and appropriate to consider larger social and institutional policies that may predispose or exacerbate "violence" and "emergency" and to consider whether more appropriate and educative and possibilities exist for de-escalation and avoiding the exacerbation of harm. Further, it is important to ask how, when, and why such policies came to seem normal, reasonable, or necessary across MCM's urban and minoritized campuses. Policies inscribing the intervention of a large and relatively poorly paid campus security force – along with the summoning of a (Metro City) police force with a long and robustly documented history of both racially targeted violence and inappropriate use of force against peaceful political protest – seem both anti-democratic and counter to MCM's mission – more characteristic of an authoritarian society. That such policies carry a veneer of reasonableness and normalcy at a public community college-one of "democracy's colleges" (Bringle et al., 2014, p. 13)—raises troubling questions. By raising these questions, we are not arguing linear causality or even explicit explanatory generalization from the specificity of MCM to the wider population of all community colleges or higher education more broadly. Rather, we ask readers to consider whether similar policies exist at their own home institutions, at the institutions where they received their education, at elite and predominately white institutions, or – in the context of the extension of the SPN – at their children's Pk-12 schools. And if so, at what potential detriment to institutional obligations to educate, nurture potential, and open academic, civic, and economic opportunities? We argue that such policies (1) potentially impinge upon the civic function of education in general and public community colleges in particular, (2) potentially aggravate a climate of suspicion, mistrust, fear, and surveillance, (3) represent at least a rhetorical escalation of carcerality, (4) inscribe and prescribe forcible intervention (i.e., calling Metro City police "if demonstrations interfere with normal operations of the college" or "prevent access to . . . facilities"), and (5) suggest a more problematic escalation of racialized fear and mistrust at an urban public community college.

Overall analysis of findings

Like other community colleges (Ayers, 2002; Manns, 2014), MCM's mission foregrounds openness, opportunity, and student success. But the findings we offer here tell a different story. MCM provides a critical exemplification of the school-prison nexus that permeates post-secondary education and that functions to surveil, contain, discipline, and exclude students and to harden the enclosure of bodies and minds by institutions of higher education. The nexus we describe here is both deeply personal – in that it harms people, and it is simultaneously totally impersonal – as a self-perpetuating system that acts on and constrains all it touches. In times of global pandemic, intense political polarization, and hyper-visible racial violence and injustice, higher education should be focused on uplift and healing, not on corrections, devolving blame, and fear of collective action.

More broadly, our findings suggest how the SPN might be understood and critically scrutinized beyond MCM – in other community colleges and in higher education more generally. That is, we suggest that these findings are neither entirely unique to MCM nor to priorities, policies, and procedures across institutions of higher education, especially increasingly "fortified" institutions (Wilson, 2021; Klinenberg, 2018; Patel, 2021) located in racialized urban or liminal suburban communities with large populations of minoritized students. Our findings at least suggest that potentially emancipatory opportunities presented by higher education may in fact be enclosed, monitored, surveilled, and policed in ways that can serve to exclude racialized and other so called surplus populations (Davis, 2011; Raza, 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, we analyzed publicly available data from a midsized urban community college district to demonstrate the reach of the school-prison nexus into and through higher education. We offered evidence of MCM's investments in security over academics and its framings of and responses to structural and institutional precarity and student protest that effectively normalize and individualize struggle and widespread institutional "failure," and potentially foreclose opportunities for students to act collectively to redress these harms. Our findings reveal MCM policies that prioritize surveillance, monitoring, and literal and figurative policing of students – notably minoritized students – over investing in academics and student welfare – including via policies that appear to contradict missions rooted in access and opportunity and enhancing the public good. These findings demonstrate some of the ways that MCM enacts confinement and exclusion in ways that parallel prison. The conditions we describe are neither inevitable nor immutable. Institutions of higher education like MCM can reconsider skewed priorities and punitive policies. Community colleges enroll more than 40% of all undergraduate students in the United States and could indeed function as ladders of opportunity and economic mobility, yet they too often harden students' educational enclosure and ideological confinement by normalizing existing racial, economic, and social inequities. While similar dynamics of punishment and containment have been well-documented in PK-12 schools, their presence in higher education can be obscured behind appealing promises of higher education as a golden ticket to opportunity and personal transformation.

We began this paper with a 2018 press release in which Metro City's mayor described "affordable 21st century academic and workforce preparedness programs" at MCM to "position students for success in the fast-growing industries bringing jobs to our city." In the same press release, MCM's chancellor announced that the district was "working to ensure all [Metro City] residents [. . .] find success and the path to upward mobility." These statements were presented, apparently without irony, to publicize "a record high 22.9% graduation rate" — up from 11% just seven years prior (MCM press release, 2018, n.p.).

We invite readers to consider whether and how our findings help reveal the ideological force of framing community colleges and higher education in general as open and available to all with the intelligence and determination to take advantage of them, rather than as bounded by policies,

priorities, and racialized structures of exclusion and enclosure. We hope to encourage students, faculty, staff, and leaders to consider whether specific college and university policies and structures that help maintain the SPN and PIC (such as those we describe above) can offer points of departure for pedagogical, curricular, and campus organizing to help ensure that post-secondary education delivers on promises of pathways to success and upward mobility.

This work has important implications for government and policy officials, scholars, and students and practitioners in higher education and beyond. We suggest that abolitionist scholarship (Davis, 2011; Kaba, 2020; Meiners, 2007; Purnell, 2021) and other radical reexaminations of higher education (e.g., Ferguson, 2017; Paperson, 2017; Patel, 2021) point the way to more liberatory approaches to post-secondary education. Our analysis suggests that instead of continuing to devolve blame to students (and faculty and staff), post-secondary institutions can instead reconsider policies and priorities and institutional structures that harm students. Further studies are needed to explore the SPN in higher education and to continue to clarify its empirical reach and functioning. At the institutional level, our work suggests that colleges and universities can invest and divest in ways that honor their missions by allocating resources for faculty, advising, counseling, and pedagogies and curricula of healing and transformation in place of surveillance, punitive assessment, and punishment. Colleges and universities can encourage organizing and civic participation – social agency – by funding student-directed spaces, organizing, and student, faculty, staff, teach ins and convenings around how to address problematic institutional outcomes. At the interpersonal level, our work suggests the urgent need to reexamining faculty/staff/student relationships and the ways traditional institutional practices legitimize racialized and ahistorical narratives about opportunity, access, meritocracy, and decontextualized student success/failure (e.g., Guinier, 2016). As we describe more thoroughly in forthcoming work, community college and other higher education faculty and staff can work with students to fracture the SPN by retooling curriculum, pedagogy, and participatory models of undergraduate research that flatten interpersonal "fortifications" and inhibit both strong and genuine relationships between students, faculty, and staff, as well as authentic personal/political engagement with complex and increasingly urgent "real world" challenges and opportunities.

In *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Gilmore (2007) makes the argument that, in the face of global outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, increasing mechanization and consolidation of agricultural work, and having divested from its once nation-leading PK-20 public education system, California embarked on a prison building spree. California's prisons were built, Gilmore argues, to contain and incapacitate surplus populations of "modestly educated [Black and Brown] working people" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 11) whose labor had become disposable, in order "to produce social stability through applying some mix of care, indifference, [and] compulsory training" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 14). The rapid construction of California's "golden gulag" was, in part, an effort to cope with shifts away from plentiful manufacturing jobs in urban centers and agricultural work in rural areas to what Andrew Hacker describes as a "separate, hostile, and unequal" highly bifurcated labor market composed of low-wage service jobs and high wage so called "knowledge-based" jobs (Hacker, 2010). Similar trends are readily apparent across Metro City, the state, and the country as a whole, with (formerly) working class neighborhoods (like those from which most MCM students are drawn) abutting shuttered factories (Wilson, 1996) and state and federal funding for education as a whole and higher education in particular tanking at the same time that expenditures on policing and prisons skyrocket (Gilmore, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Manufacturing jobs, and world-leading free or inexpensive public higher education that brought millions of migrants and immigrants to the Metro City area and to cities across the U.S. during the first half of the 20th century, have largely been replaced by hollow promises of open educational opportunity and "21st century" work in "fast-growing industries" like finance, high technology, and aerospace – positions that demand four-year college degrees and post-graduate credentials, none of which are offered at MCM. Rather than a free or affordable education and gateway to opportunity, our findings illustrate skewed, carceral policies and practices of surveillance, containment, and enclosure, along with outcomes suggesting that MCM functions, for the majority of its students, more like

a prison – a site of literal and ideological containment – than a promised "pathway to upward mobility" (MCM press release, 2018, n.p.). In society where "college for all" is often represented as a means of fostering equity and opportunity, we must ensure that "all" who seek it are afforded opportunities for hope, healing, and uplift through higher education.

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