ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Unlocking Potential: Social Capital in Washington University's Prison Education Program

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Washington University's Prison Education Program (PEP), established in 2011, reflects a broader national movement to expand higher education access in prisons following rising incarceration rates and the elimination of Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals. As a private, elite research university located in St. Louis, Missouri, one of the most socioeconomically and racially divided cities in the country, WashU's PEP introduces both opportunities and tensions for program participants. This tension affects how participants perceive their affiliation with WashU, leading to both increased confidence and skepticism about the University's role in their education and post-release opportunities. This essay explores the impact of WashU's Prison Education Program on inmates' social capital, defined as the networks of people's relationships which are productive towards advancing their goals, and compares this experience to research on PEPs in other universities. Like this study, past scholarship also measures changes in social capital to evaluate the effect of a PEP on participants' lives because of social capital's relevance to one's opportunities and socioeconomic mobility, which are essential for inmates reentering society. Due to WashU's status as a wealthy, private research university, affiliation with the University generally increases social capital. To facilitate this research, three faculty members of WashU's Prison Education Project were interviewed and multiple graduates of the program were surveyed about their personal experiences and insights. The results of the study did not prove conclusive, partly due to small sample size and limited interaction with participants. However, two main trends were identified: an increase in social capital due to participating in WashU PEP, which aligns with past scholarship, and the identification of a pattern of complex relationships between participants of PEP and Washington University.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, at 583 incarcerated people per 100,000 [13]. Additionally, the recidivism rate, or the rate of people returning to prison, is incredibly high. A recent study by the US Department of Justice revealed that on average, 82% of people return to state prison within ten years of release [9]. This was not always the case, though. Between 1980 and 2013, the prison incarceration rate tripled. Sentence stiffening in the 1990s grew the prison population drastically, which, according to public policy researchers Magnus Lofstrom and Steven Raphael, "has exacerbated socioeconomic inequality in the United States without generating much benefit in terms of lower crime rates" [10]. The growth of the US criminal justice system disproportionately affected poor people and people of color and continues to have a negative impact on those communities. In line with the 1990s' "tough on crime" rhetoric, the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act was passed, taking away prisoners' ability to apply for Pell Grants, which would help them afford college tuition and supplies [11]. To address high recidivism rates and limited educational opportunities, prison education programs, especially those created by colleges and universities, have become increasingly popular.

Among the most notable examples of prison education programs are the Boston University Prison Education Program and the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI). Boston University's Prison Education Program was the first of its kind and began offering college courses to inmates in Massachusetts state prisons in 1972 [2]. BPI was founded in 1999 in response to the dismantling of many higher education programs in prisons and has graduated over 400 students since [1]. Through the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison, the Initiative takes on a major role in supporting other prison education programs, including the program at Washington University [1].

Washington University's Prison Education Project (PEP) was started in 2011 by six faculty members, led by Professor Emeritus Danny Kohl and the late Professor Maggie Garb [12]. PEP is funded in large part by the Bard Prison Initiative, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and also receives funding from Washington University. Initially launched at a medium-security men's prison, the program expanded to include a women's prison in 2020. With their first class of students having graduated in 2019, 38 students have now graduated from the WashU PEP, including 5 women [12]. The program has succeeded in fostering academic and personal growth for inmates, offering them a liberal arts education and the chance to learn from world-class professors. How has the program, which gives inmates in a rural state prison the opportunity to earn a degree from an elite university, affected inmates' social capital?

The term 'social capital' was first defined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 essay, "Forms of Capital" as "the actual or potential resources which are linked to… membership in a group– which provides each of its members with… credit" [3]. Bourdieu continues, noting that the volume of one's social capital

depends on "the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize… and the volume of capital possessed… by each of those to whom he is connected" [3]. Based on this definition, it is easy to see how social capital is highly dependent on factors that are often out of a person's control, including the family and socioeconomic situation that they are born into. These factors are also highly correlated with someone's risk of incarceration, as poor people and people whose family members have been to prison are more likely to be imprisoned themselves [5].

The effects of prison education programs on inmates' social capital is a subject that has been studied extensively. Researchers Curtis et. al examined higher education in prison In their 2021 study of 18 formerly incarcerated men at New York state prisons, "Developing Social Capital through Postsecondary Correctional Education". The men in the study all attended the same education program in a New York state prison. The program was available to any inmate without behavior infractions who was willing to complete a pre-college program before participating in the college program. In their study, the researchers describe social capital as "an invaluable asset in the lives of those who are successful in acquiring the resources necessary to be economically and socially self-sufficient" [7]. Similarly, in 2023, researcher Patrick Conway used a lens of critical andragogy to explore the same topic in Boston University's Prison Education Program, detailed in his article "Education Changes a Person': Exploring Student Development in a College-in-Prison Program through Critical Andragogy". Andragogy refers to the teaching of adults, and Conway cites previous scholarship to frame critical andragogy as "one which prioritizes learners' personal histories and development toward self-direction, as well as their intersecting social identities in light of the well-documented repressive dynamics inside prisons both within the US and internationally" [6]. Conway's study included men and women in two Massachusetts state prisons who participated in Boston University's Prison Education Program, the oldest PEP in the country with over 350 graduates. With this research in mind, I aim to expand upon their work by studying the same topic within Washington University's Prison Education Project. This study will test the same topics as past scholarship, focusing on changes in inmates' self-perception and social capital. In addition, it brings in the perspectives of PEP faculty as a new variable in the results. I also compare the demographics and state prison statistics of each program and investigate the role that an education from a prestigious institution has on inmates.

How does an inmate's social capital change through participating in WashU's PEP? What differences lie between Missouri prisons and those of the New York and Boston studies? If there are significant discrepancies, why might these exist? If there are not significant discrepancies, this would point to prison education programs being similarly effective in prisons located in very politically and demographically different states. New York and Massachusetts are both strong blue states politically, are home to large, diverse metropolitan areas in New York City and Boston, and are located on the East Coast. Missouri is located in the middle of the United States, has a much larger rural population, and is a strong red state. At a rate of 735 per 100,000, Missouri's incarceration rate is almost double that of New York's and nearly triple that of Massachusetts'[17]. Further, the racial demographics of the three states differ. New York has the most diverse population, with the smallest percentage of white people (61%) and the highest percentage of Black residents (15%) [19]. Missouri is around 80% white and 11% Black and Massachusetts is 75% white and 7% Black [18]. Within the prisons of each state, all have higher proportions of incarcerated Black people compared to Black residents in the state, which is in line with data for the entire United States.

Washington University is located in St. Louis, mere blocks away from the famous "Delmar Divide" named after the boulevard that separates a wealthy, predominantly white area from a much poorer, predominantly Black area [4]. The university is a hallmark of the wealthier side of the divide. It is an institution of immense privilege and has historically harmed communities in St. Louis. The University-run website, The WashU & Slavery Project, informs readers that "Several of the institution's founding leaders derived their wealth and power in part through the dispossession of Native Americans and exploitation of enslaved African Americans" [14]. As a more recent example of WashU's unequal relationship with its surroundings, the University does not pay any taxes on its properties in University City, a region of St. Louis. According to a 2015 report by University City, WashU's property taxes would generate $1.61-$1.86 million dollars [15]. As quoted in an article by WashU's Student Life newspaper, a 2020 report commissioned by University City found that WashU had a "significant fiscal burden on the City" [20]. However, the university has taken action to become more accessible to people of different backgrounds and make a positive impact among communities that it has historically harmed. Their recent commitment to financial aid and need-blind admissions lowers the barriers to entry for students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds [8]. The Brown School of Social Work has participated in a project called "Delmar DivINe", which consists of a coalition of nonprofits dedicated to uplifting North St. Louis City that highlights the area's potential rather than its deficits [21]. Lastly, the PEP itself is an instance of WashU's recent commitment to repairing the relationship between the university and the surrounding communities.

Methods

To answer my research question, I interviewed multiple faculty members of the Prison Education Program to learn from their perspectives and sent a survey (Fig 1) to former and current participants in the program. Multiple professors and leaders in the PEP program were contacted for interviews, including current and former directors and professors in the Project. In the end, I was able to interview three faculty members: Dr. Trevor Sangrey, academic advisor for Washington University's Prison Education Project, Ms. Eileen G'Sell, Senior Lecturer at WashU and faculty member of PEP who taught multiple courses at the men's prison, and Dr. Meredith Kelling, former PEP academic director and current assistant director of student research and engagement at the Center for the Humanities. The three faculty members' perspectives were generally consistent, as they all had positive views of their time in the program and were knowledgeable of how WashU's history in St. Louis complicated their students' relationship with the program. Each interview was about one hour long and consisted of pre-written questions and spontaneous follow-up questions that created an informal and conversational environment, allowing for further exploration into the faculty's experiences and insights into PEP. The interviews were recorded using an iPhone and were later transcribed.

It is important to note that the results of this survey are limited

by the number of PEP faculty that were interviewed, the number of respondents to the survey, and selection bias regarding faculty and PEP graduates. Due to limited access to PEP graduates and PEP faculty, this study's findings are exploratory rather than generalizable. However, small sample sizes are a common limitation in prison education research, as access to participants remains a barrier. Multiple former and current faculty of WashU PEP were contacted, and ultimately, only three were able to interview within the time frame. Other faculty were unavailable to interview or did not respond after being contacted. Each of the faculty that were interviewed had positive experiences working in PEP, though from their interviews, I was given the impression that the entire team of PEP faculty in general had positive experiences teaching inmates. Still, the experiences of each faculty member of PEP are unique, and the faculty that were interviewed may have had more positive experiences than others. Additionally, while the insights of PEP faculty and participants are compelling and differentiate this study from others, additional perspectives, such as from correctional officers at the prison, non-PEP inmates, program administrators, could contextualize these findings.

In addition to interviewing members of the PEP faculty, I collected data from PEP graduates through a Google Forms survey (Fig 1). I was unable to meet in person with any former inmates due to restrictions on undergraduate research for my class and feasibility of arranging meetings in a narrow time frame. Survey distribution was limited due to insufficient contact information for PEP graduates and the inability to offer compensation. Professor G'Sell, who was also my mentor for this project, sent the survey to two former PEP participants with whom she was still in contact with, and they were encouraged to share it with other graduates. I was not able to access contact information of other former PEP participants due to restrictions on this project as an undergraduate student. In the end, three total participants responded to the survey. This does represent a conflict of interest in the survey respondents, as two out of the three remained in contact with Professor G'Sell, and therefore may not be representative of PEP participants as a whole. Because of the anonymous nature of the survey, it is unknown which of the respondents were in the two in contact with Professor G'Sell and which received it from one of the other respondents.

The survey contained 5 questions about demographics, 4 multiple choice questions, and four long-answer questions about their time at PEP. The multiple-choice questions asked each respondent to choose the option that best fit them regarding the statement "Throughout my time in Washington University's Prison Education Program, I experienced a change in the perception I have of myself" (Fig 1). The options included Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. This question format was also used to ask about self-efficacy and confidence. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their own ability to achieve goals and is considered to be an important factor in one's motivation and ability to learn. Another important term used in the survey is self-perception, which refers to how one thinks about themselves, including their traits, abilities, and weaknesses. Of the four long-answer questions, two asked for elaborations on how respondents' self-efficacy and self-perception changed; one question asked to describe the impact that studying at Washington University, an elite university, had on their self-perception and self-confidence. The final question provided a space for respondents to elaborate on any of their answers or include any other details that they felt were relevant to their experience at PEP (Fig 1). The survey began with a statement informing participants that the survey was completely anonymous, that all the questions are optional, and informed them that the data would be used as a project for a writing class (Fig 1).

Results

Interviewing the three former faculty members of WashU PEP provided detailed commentary regarding the reality of teaching inmates, as well as the broader context that WashU PEP is situated in, both for the students and the university. To begin, Dr. Trevor Sangrey described the effect that learning from professors from a top-tier university has on students' confidence. They describe this experience as being "a huge confidence boost, particularly because most of the folks are from this area or are from Missouri, and WashU's name is recognizable, so [it's] the idea that they could do equivalent work in… a setting that they would never have had the opportunity to interact with if they hadn't come to prison" (T. Sangrey, personal communication, April 19, 2024). Dr. Sangrey added that through participating in the program, students prove to themselves that they are capable of doing the work expected of students at an prestigious university, whose backgrounds are very different to the inmates'. Senior Lecturer Eileen G'Sell added to this conversation saying that "for a lot of students, knowing that I was from WashU…, the fact that we wanted to be there, and that we were also getting paid… these legitimizing factors made it seem like this wasn't just a performance" (personal communication, April 23, 2024). Further, Ms. G'Sell noted that being taken seriously, both by fellow students and authority figures, was transformative for the inmates: they took themselves more seriously as a result.

In addition to improving inmates' self-confidence, Dr. Sangrey noted that the program also helps them realize that a felony conviction does not have to limit the ways they view themselves or the careers they can pursue (personal communication, April 19, 2024). The increase in confidence and change in self-perception that Dr. Sangrey and Ms. G'Sell witnessed was also seen in the studies in Boston and New York, reinforcing the broader impact of such programs. In fact, one of the main themes in the New York study's results was how inmates' self-efficacy transformed. The researchers reported that inmates spoke frequently of how receiving an education improved their confidence drastically. Some inmates noted feeling like they had greater control over their lives, as well as setting more ambitious goals for themselves and being confident that they would be able to achieve them [7].

The survey results largely corroborate Dr. Sangrey's and Ms. G'Sell's observations and the results of the New York and Boston studies, especially regarding improvements in inmates' self-esteem and their treatment in prison. For instance, Respondent A noted that the PEP 'helped [him] prioritize responsibilities, increase confidence, and learn how to be a leader,' but also acknowledged WashU's complicated relationship with their community. Of the three survey respondents, two are white men (Respondents A and C) and one is a black man (Respondent B), all are between the ages of 35-50, and all attended PEP between 2016 and 2021. Respondents A and C graduated with Associate degrees in Liberal Arts and Respondent B graduated with a BS in Integrated Studies. The survey was set up to collect easily comparable information while also giving respondents the opportunity to elaborate on

those responses. In receiving these results, I appreciate how vital it is to ask long-answer questions, as each person's experience is unique and nuanced. While the participants' answers were very similar on the multiple-choice questions, their responses to the long-answer questions varied.

For example, when asked if their confidence improved as a result of participating in WashU PEP, two of the respondents marked "strongly agree" (Respondents A and B), while the other marked "agree" (Respondent C). However, when asked to discuss the impact that studying at WashU, an elite institution, had on their confidence and self-perception, the respondents had slightly differing responses. Respondent A, who has started a non-profit that helps people returning from confinement, noted that the presence of the university in his life was like "a double-edged sword" (personal communication, April 2024). On one hand, he responded that the program helped him prioritize responsibilities, increase his confidence, and learn how to be a leader, but added that "the University has done more harm in my community than it has good" (Respondent A, personal communication, April 2024). This insight is an example of how WashU's history as an institution complicates PEP students' relationship with their education. This response stood in contrast to the Boston and New York studies, which reported no negative responses regarding the education programs in their respective prisons. However, as a top-tier university with a 16-billion dollar endowment in St. Louis, Missouri- one of the most racially and socio-economically segregated cities in the United States- Washington University has a complex relationship with St. Louis.

Similarly to Respondent A's mixed feelings towards WashU, Respondent B, who continued studying at Washington University's Danforth Campus after his release, reported that studying at WashU "insulated me from many of the pitfalls that ensnare returning citizens into the downward spiral that leads many of us back into cages" (personal communication, April 2024). In addition, he reported an increase in confidence and that studying at WashU gave him opportunities that former inmates without the same education would not have. However, he also wrote that being the first participant in the PEP to study at the Danforth Campus was a "thankless" experience and that he experienced an "inordinate amount of self-imposed mental pressure" to succeed and take advantage of this opportunity (Respondent B, personal communication, April 2024).

In my search for more information about the path from PEP to studying at WashU's Danforth Campus, I interviewed Dr. Meredith Kelling about her insights into PEP and its effects on inmates. Dr. Kelling discussed the complex history of WashU's relationship with the St. Louis area, noting that individuals who grew up in St. Louis, were incarcerated, and then participated in PEP often questioned "'why is WashU here for me now and not… at any stage before I got locked up?'" (personal communication, April 22, 2024). Eileen G'Sell described that in her experience, many students in PEP are "both grateful for the program and aware that to some extent, they're a PR move for the university" (personal communication, April 23, 2024). She expands on this topic, saying that the PEP students "make the university seem like they're doing something that's addressing socioeconomic… and racial inequality, and indeed, they are, but at the same time, it… doesn't change the history of WashU as an institution with a lot of barriers to entry" (personal communication, April 23, 2024). Neither the survey respondents themselves nor the studies regarding the other universities' PEPs mentioned concerns about being used for PR purposes. However, the survey respondents were not asked about this question in specific, and the nature of the interviews with PEP faculty facilitated more in-depth exploration into these themes. These results are evidence of the complex relationship that PEP students have with their degree, with WashU, and with their communities.

Lastly, Respondent C wrote that a WashU degree could help a person overcome their record if they know how to leverage it well. After graduating from PEP, Respondent C continued his education at the Danforth Campus, earning a B.S. in natural science and mathematics from Washington University. In his survey responses, he revealed feeling that "I could accomplish more than even the administration felt I could" (Respondent C, personal communication, April 2024). Upon his release, he pushed to take lab classes when he was released and pursued a STEM education, which is uncommon among graduates from prison education programs. While all three respondents reported benefiting from the program, it is important to also consider their struggles, the complex relationship they and their communities have with Washington University, and the potential areas for improvement within the University and the program.

A final finding of the survey regards the participants' self-perception before and after studying at a prison education program. Respondent A answered that his self-perception was changed through the program, and specifically that it helped him overcome low self-esteem and helped him become a leader. This response aligned with the results of the Boston study, in which participants noted improvements in self-esteem and many of the people interviewed now hold leadership positions in their communities, workplaces, and churches [6]. Respondent B's experience differed, as he marked "neutral" when asked if his self-perception changed during his time studying in the PEP. He explained that his family had instilled the value of higher education upon him when he was very young, and he never imagined that he would go to prison. Despite growing up in North St. Louis during the crack cocaine epidemic (he mentions that everyone he knew had family members in prison), he graduated high school and enrolled in college, but did not graduate. Respondent B describes that, because of how he was raised, "my self-perception was that of a scholar long before my enrollment into WashU PEP. However, after my enrollment, my self-perception elevated to that of a scholar with a renewed purpose and mission" (personal communication, April 2024). This is a departure from the responses in the New York and Boston studies, as well as from statistics on education and incarceration. As Dr. Kelling mentioned in her interview, most people in PEP do not have high school diplomas. In the Boston study, participants did not mention having scholarly self-perceptions before entering prisons [6]. The respondents noted that during and after their education in prison, they experienced positive growth in their self-perceptions because they were educated and because educators and other students in the program treated them with more respect than those outside of the program.

To this point, Sangrey noted that though they and all PEP educators were required to call students by their last names, but that it was much more natural for them to refer to their students by their first names, especially in the women's prison. Sangrey noted that in the women's prison, "there was an ease with people, a sharing of not necessarily personal information, but causal information"

(personal communication, April 19, 2024). Most of the educators and administrators in PEP during Sangrey's time as an academic advisor were women, which could be a contributing factor. In the men's prison, the environment and attitudes between educators and students was much more formal and removed (T. Sangrey, personal communication, April 19, 2024).

Discussion

The experience of being treated very differently within the program versus in prison in general was reflected in the New York and Boston studies as well. This is a significant reason why prison education programs can be so effective and transformative in inmates' lives. As Curtis, Evans, and Pelletier point out, many people who end up in prison were raised in situations where their social capital was not adequately developed, which is often a contributing factor in why some inmates end up in prison. Once in prison, their environment is not conducive to acquiring or developing these skills [7], which one can assume would also make them more likely to return to prison after being released. Conway's research of Boston University's Prison Education Program revealed that inmates described imprisonment, including the treatment they received from correctional officers and other inmates, as "dehumanizing" [6]. Though prison is ostensibly supposed to rehabilitate inmates, elements of being imprisoned, including literally being behind bars, the lack of privacy, and the lack of control over one's daily life can contribute to the feeling of dehumanization reported in Conway's study. Others in the study noted that, although they did not feel unintelligent in prison, they felt out of control of their own lives and disempowered [6]. Education gave them an opportunity to empower themselves and regain some control over their lives.

As demonstrated through the results of the survey and interviews, WashU PEP has been a positive force in its students' lives. Inmates not only have the opportunity to gain academic skills and earn a college degree, but also reported having healthier self-conceptions, a stronger sense of confidence, and increased self-efficacy. These skills set inmates up for a more successful release and reentry into society. Many of the findings of my research, both the interviews and the survey responses, corroborated what was reported in the studies of prison education programs in New York and Boston. An important departure, however, was the factor of Washington University being an elite institution and its complicated history with St. Louis, especially among poor and predominantly African American communities. It is important to acknowledge how WashU's history still affects the institution itself and the St. Louis community today, even if steps are being taken to restore and repair that relationship. Only by recognizing and taking accountability for the institution's role in harmful policies and practices such as gentrification and exclusion can WashU truly be "In St. Louis, for St. Louis" [16]. In the future, Washington University could improve its engagement with PEP alumni through a structured transition program. As Respondent B mentioned, continuing his studies at the University's main campus helped him avoid the "pitfalls that ensnare returning citizens". Yet at the time, he was the first PEP alumni to continue his studies at WashU following his release. Reentering society is a critical and vulnerable time for former inmates, and implementing a system of mentoring and financial support for PEP alumni could make a significant impact on their transition and reduce their risk of recidivism as they navigate reentry with the skills they developed during the PEP. Further research could examine specific ways in which the University could continue to improve and expand its program, as well as surveying more people involved with PEP, students and educators alike.

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Appendix

Fig. 1 | Survey

Survey: Social Capital in Washington University's Prison Education Program

My name is Colette Correa-Bruzzese and I am a first-year student at Washington University. am conducting a research project for my College Writing class about the changes than inmates experience in their social capital while studying in Washington University's Prison Education Program. I would greatly appreciate it if you would take the time to complete this survey and respond honestly. This survey is anonymous, but I am collecting demographic information for purposes of comparison. If there are any questions you would prefer not to answer, feel free to select that option or leave a written question blank. Thank you!

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?

2. What is your race/ethnicity?

Check all that apply.

- [ ] White
- [ ] Black
- [ ] Hispanic/Latino
- [ ] Native American
- [ ] Asian/Pacific Islander
- [ ] Prefer not to answer
- [ ] Other:

3. What is your gender?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Prefer not to answer
- ◯ Other:

4. When did you attend Washington University's Prison Education Program? ie, 2016-2020

5. Have you completed your degree? If so, what degree did you earn upon graduation from Washington University's Prison Education Program?

Social Capital Questions

For the following questions, please select the option that most closely resembles how you identify with each statement.

6. Throughout my time in Washington University's Prison Education Program, I experienced an increase in confidence.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

7. Throughout my time in Washington University's Prison Education Program, my communication skills improved.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

8. Throughout my time in Washington University's Prison Education Program, I experienced a change in my self-efficacy. Self efficacy is described as an individual's belief in their capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

9. Throughout my time in Washington University's Prison Education Program, I experienced a change in the perception I have of myself.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

10. Please describe the change you experienced, if any, in your self-efficacy during your time studying in Washington University's Prison Education Program.

11. Please describe the change you experienced, if any, in your self-perception during your time studying in Washington University's Prison Education Program.

12. Please describe the impact, if any, that studying and earning a degree from Washington University, an elite university with name recognition, has had on your self-confidence and self-perception.