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# Participatory Evaluation in a Prison Education Program: Meaning & Community Building within Inside-Out Think Tanks

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents the processes associated with a participatory evaluation of alumni groups—Think Tanks—affiliated with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. The participatory evaluation members included people incarcerated (Inside members) and an academic scholar (Outside member). Members were affiliated with Inside-Out and part of their respective Think Tanks. The participatory project yields insights related to having team members who are Inside and Outside people. In several ways, the participatory evaluation members experienced challenges to their working model throughout the project. Data come from nine focus groups convened in eight prisons moderated by the Outside member. The findings describe the personal meanings that Think Tank members attributed to being in the group. The analyses revealed that Think Tank participation represents a significant, positive experience to members. The themes identified to highlight the concepts of individual transformation, relationships, civic engagement, and solace. The perceptions of Think Tank experiences convey substantial individual growth as well as community building within and beyond the group into the general prison population and the outside world.

## KEYWORDS

Prisons; rehabilitation; programming; relationships

## Introduction

In the United States, estimates are that most (85%) state correctional facilities provide some type of mandatory or voluntary educational or vocational programming (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). For example, 28 out of the 50 U.S. states participate in a U.S. Department of Education initiative – Second Chance Pell Experiment – that affords up to 12,000 incarcerated people access to learning and experiences in academic and career-technical programs (Vera Institute of Justice, 2017).

Historically, interest with prison programming has been tightly linked with its ability to facilitate desistance from crime (McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, & Maruna, 2012) and thus centered on reducing recidivism and prisoner misconduct. In addition, correctional prison programming assessments have focused on post-release unemployment, unresponsive therapeutic outcomes, and/or facility or correctional system costs as outcomes. The label “nothing works” was coined (Seiter & Kadela, 2003) to describe Martinson’s (1974) landmark claim that prison programming was wholly ineffective for rehabilitation or treatment (Duwe, 2017, p. 3). Subsequent critical reviews led Duwe to coin a label for more recent assessments: “what works literature” (p. 3). Now, there is consensus that

prison programming has important, positive outcomes for participants, especially education programming with higher levels of program integrity (Duwe, 2017).

Indeed, Austin (2017) argues that recent scholarship

signals the obvious need to no longer fund or conduct further studies of the impact of prison education on prisoners. We have learned as much as we can ... we know that people who enroll and complete any type of educational or vocational training program have a better chance to have lower prison misconduct rates and recidivism rates. (p. 3)

Austin's claim raises several questions: What outcomes, if any, remain important points of focus? What is the value of participatory evaluation approaches to prison education programming? What do inquiries about the meaning of participation in prison education programming reveal? From a corrections perspective, is there an added value to programming that involves participant developed and implemented initiatives that incorporates the dimension of having outside people collaboratively involved?

### **Participatory research and evaluation on prison education programming**

Most research to date on prison education programming has involved academic researchers using quantitative designs. Recent scholarship reflects more diverse approaches, in part because of a recognition for the “need for prisoner input” (Miller, Tillyer, & Miller, 2012, p. 274) and/or the value of “collaborative research projects in prisons” (Brosens, 2018, p. 6). Such diversity has manifest in more inclusive research teams, such as researchers and corrections professionals (Brosens, 2018); qualitative inquiries where the opinions of incarcerated people about education programming are the central focus (Bennett, 2015); and mixed methods designs, such as qualitative interviews alongside quantitative measures (Miller et al., 2012) that deepen understanding of “process and management barriers to optimal program operation” (Miller et al., 2012, p. 274). With some exceptions (Fine & Torre, 2006; Payne & Brown, 2016), however, participatory models remain largely on the fringes of prison education programming. This is most apparent where the involvement of incarcerated people is structured, meaningful, and sustained. Payne and Bryant (2018) advocate for the “most aggressive” model of participatory research, one that involves “PAR members in all phases of the research project” (p. 451).

Participatory evaluation shares important features with participatory research: “both are research processes, and both emphasize power structure-transforming forms of participation” (Stoecker, 1999, p. 212). They create “communicative spaces” within which researchers explore and work out group dynamics: “the type of participation for members; leadership roles; opportunities to express anxiety; and the balance between structure and informality in the approach to research” (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, p. 5). Participatory methodologies vary on other dimensions, including the extent to which the emphasis is on collaboration or change in social life facilitated by participatory inquiry (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

How is participatory evaluation possible, however, if participatory members include academic researchers and people incarcerated? What barriers – objective and subjective – must be anticipated and/or managed when some participatory members are in prisons, places that are about “loss of liberty” (Behan, 2014, p. 23), “social death” (Price, 2015, p. 5), and “ultimate social exclusion” (Behan, 2014, p. 144), and have “worked so hard – and effectively – at removing all sense of humanity” (McCoy, 2012, p. 128)?

Against this backdrop, this article describes a participatory evaluation project best defined as a first phase assessment of a prison-based education program that has experienced tremendous growth in the past 20 years. Called the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the pedagogy was designed to be educative, transformative, conducive to dialogue across difference, and focused on criminal justice and other social issues.

The discussion includes an overview of the Inside-Out pedagogy that brings together college students and people incarcerated for semester-long courses. Occasionally, Inside-Out students and their instructors continue to meet regularly after a course ends to maintain focus on course topics and projects. What follows is a description of the participatory evaluation of these “alumni collectives” or “Think Tanks,” “how it happened,” what we learned, some findings from focus groups with nine Inside-Out Think Tanks, and their implications. All but one of the focus group questions were centered on aspects of the group (e.g., group mission, group accomplishments). The findings reported here, however, are from the last question asked per focus group and pertain to members’ accounts of what participation meant to them personally. Our participatory evaluation team members (hereafter called participatory members) selected this starting point to elevate the voices of prison education participants in the description of why this type of prison education programming is important for them and others (e.g., prisons, families, communities).

### **Inside-out prison exchange program: background for this project**

This participatory evaluation represents a mixed model when considering the distinct features of an external (i.e., designed and implemented by a paid, independent professional evaluator) versus an internal program evaluation (i.e., assessment designed and implemented by those within an organization for its own purposes). On the one hand, all participatory members are directly affiliated with the Inside-Out Program (e.g., as an Inside-Out Instructor, former Inside-Out student, member of an Inside-Out Advisory Board, Think Tank member) and are active participants in their respective Think Tanks. In addition, in the project development phases, participatory members discussed some aspects of the project with Inside-Out Center staff. For example, participatory members received confirmation from the Center about their support for a participatory evaluation of Inside-Out Think Tanks.

Likewise, Center staff agreed with the participatory member determination that it was not advisable for Inside-Out to hire an outside or external evaluator for this assessment. Our data collection strategy – focus groups – involved guided conversations with highly unique groups and required someone able to establish rapport quickly in a challenging setting. The project required access to groups where knowledge of Inside-Out Think Tank and facility relationships and protocol were essential. In these ways, participatory members were well-suited for this project. The Inside participatory members were incarcerated at the same facility and, thus, could not travel to focus group sites. However, Inside participatory members were consistently involved in other phases, including design and analysis.

The project design (e.g., focus, instrument design, data analysis strategy, report writing) was enacted without direction from Inside-Out. Inside-Out was asked, however, to cover some project expenses (i.e., the costs for focus group notetakers and stenographer services). Inside-Out Center staff (i.e., Think Tank coordinator, a former Inside Think Tank member, and Associate Director) reviewed the data collection instruments, and Inside-Out Center staff facilitated several in-person work sessions for the participatory members

(e.g., processed gate permissions, communicated with Inside participatory members about availability for meetings).

## ***Inside-out courses***

### ***Overview***

The idea for the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program developed from an encounter and conversation between Lori Pompa – Founder and Director – and Paul Perry, a participatory member who is serving a life sentence in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. They met in 1992 when Pompa took her Temple University criminology students on a tour of the State Correctional Institution in Dallas, PA. After the tour, the students talked with Perry and a panel of men incarcerated at the Dallas facility: a conversation so impactful, educative, and engaging that Perry suggested Pompa restructure future sessions into a semester-long learning experience based in a prison. Their assessment of the dialogue was similar, and Pompa pursued options in a prison closer to Philadelphia – the Philadelphia Jail, and later Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution (SCI) Graterford – where she was a professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Temple University (“The Inside-Out Center,” 2018). Unbeknownst to Pompa at the time of her recruitment of Inside students for the first class at SCI Graterford in 2002, Paul Perry had been transferred to SCI Graterford (closed in July 2018, replaced by SCI Phoenix).

Since the first class in 1997, Inside-Out has become a well-established international organization that facilitates transformative, experiential education through an innovative approach to learning (“The Inside Out Center,” 2018). Inside-Out has held 57 training institutes (from 2004 to the present) for over 900 instructors and community leaders affiliated with 350 colleges and universities in the US and abroad. These trained instructors have facilitated over 1,000 courses for more than 35,000 inside and outside students at about 150 host correctional and educational institutions. The Inside-Out Instructor Training institute prepares people to develop and implement a college or graduate level course using the Inside-Out model. Designed as a seven-day, 60+ hour training, participants take part in an itinerary that parallels the student experience (e.g., engagement with groups of incarcerated people, participation in and reflections on interactive pedagogical approaches) while offering instructor resources and guidance insignificant course-related topics (e.g., curricular development, institutional relationships, communicating and maintaining student relational parameters, facilitating group dynamics) and facility concerns (e.g., security, orientations to facility rules) (The Inside-Out Center, 2018).

Inside-Out courses are based in prisons and jails and bring together Inside (incarcerated) and Outside (college) students who take semester-long courses with each other. Although courses are framed using the Inside-Out model, course content may accommodate a range of topics (e.g., disability, social inequality, mass incarceration, criminology, comparative literature) and disciplines (e.g., sociology, criminology, public health, history, classical studies). All Inside-Out courses are designed for collaborative and engaging student interactions as well as critical thinking and dialogue about complex social issues. Course sessions are built upon a smorgasbord of interactional templates that involve moving and mixing students quickly between icebreakers, small group discussion, large group brainstorming, and so forth. The class structure keeps students meaningfully

engaged with the topic and each other. The structure also facilitates serendipitous discoveries (e.g., “the other” students were not so different) and processes (e.g., dissolution of stereotypes about people who are incarcerated or in college) (Allred, 2009, p. 256). For additional information about the Inside-Out history, philosophy, and pedagogy, see Pompa (2002, 2013a, 2013b, 2017)) and Werts (2013).

### **Evaluation**

In 2015, the Inside-Out Center hired Research for Action (RFA, 2016), a Philadelphia-based education research firm, to conduct an independent evaluation of Inside-Out courses. The goal of the evaluation was to assess some important program elements using a pre- post-course survey of students: aspects of process (e.g., fidelity of implementation), the student experience (e.g., self-reported academic and non-academic experiences), and output variables (e.g., course completion rates) (Research for Action, 2016). For cost-effectiveness, the course evaluation focused on Inside-Out courses offered in the greater Philadelphia area. The Inside-Out Center is located at Temple University, and there is a high concentration of Inside-Out instructors affiliated with several nearby colleges and universities. Altogether, 248 students, 13 facilitators, and 10 courses were included in the evaluation. The results indicated high levels of program fidelity and student self-reports of gains in critical thinking skills, the ability to work well with others, and writing and interpreting texts. In sum, the RFA (2016) evaluation provided evidence of consistency in the way trained instructors implement their courses using the Inside-Out model in addition to some important student experiences. It also affirmed some prior anecdotal accounts and empirical assessments about the student experience. Inside-Out courses are educative, transformative, and skill building opportunities (Allred, Belche, & Robinson, 2013; Research for Action, 2016) for Inside and Outside participants alike.

### **Inside-out think tanks**

#### **History**

The founding Inside-Out Think Tank – Graterford Think Tank – emerged from Pompa’s first class in 2002 at SCI Graterford, which included Paul Perry and Tyrone Werts (Werts, 2013). Pompa described this first class as “a powerful group that wanted to continue meeting” (L. Pompa, personal communication, Fall 2017). After obtaining permission from the facility, they have since met weekly for over 15 years. They called their alumni group a Think Tank because thinking was what they “did well together” (L. Pompa, personal communication, Fall 2017). Early in the Graterford Think Tank formation and mission development, the group decided to create a national program offering a teaching institute that offers experience and instruction on the unique pedagogy of Inside-Out.

Since founding the Graterford Think Tank, at least 30 Inside-Out Think Tanks have developed in the US and abroad. Two are based in the United Kingdom, two are in Australia, and the others are across the United States (Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia). They are based in jails and county, state, and federal prisons: members are either formerly or currently Inside-Out students or course instructors. The Inside-Out National Network plan includes a means for Think Tank facilitators to update information about group activities, build community across Think Tanks, and share resources.

Inside-Out Think Tanks are not, however, like other groups labeled as think tanks. Most think tanks engage in a combination of activities – research, review, consultation – that inform policy-related proposals marketed to the public or policymakers (Selee, 2013). In contrast, the Inside-Out Center website describes Think Tanks within the network as

groups of Inside-Out alumni (both incarcerated and non-incarcerated) and/or trained faculty who meet regularly on a volunteer basis at a correctional facility. The groups form organically, based on local interests and initiatives, and are a testament to the civic engagement, human connection, and sense of agency that Inside-Out courses inspire. Think Tanks operate with the Inside-Out model, which facilitates learning via community building across social difference. Think Tanks develop their own projects, which may include leadership development, re-entry programs, training Inside-Out faculty, newsletters, initiatives (e.g., hepatitis awareness programming) that benefit those incarcerated at the host facility, or community workshops on topics such as restorative justice, conflict resolution, and racial inequality. (The Inside-Out Center, 2018)

In addition, neither Inside-Out Think Tanks nor course students engage in direct advocacy or policy promotion. Students or group members may do so as individuals but not as representatives of Inside-Out.

### ***Evaluation***

This participatory evaluation of Inside-Out Think Tanks was situated after the Research for Action (2016) evaluation of Inside-Out courses. Like knowledge of Inside-Out courses prior to the RFA course evaluation, the Inside-Out Center lacked systematic, thorough, and descriptive information on Think Tanks. The Center had documentation of the location and main contacts (i.e., Outside facilitators) per Think Tank in addition to some voluntarily submitted updates to the Center Think Tank Coordinator, Tyrone Werts. However, prior to this evaluation, the Center was limited in its ability to support the Network (e.g., trained instructors who want to start a Think Tank or facility administrators who need more information about Think Tanks).

The next section describes aspects of the participatory evaluation process: formation, focus, and activities. This description highlights the supportive and impeding “mediating mechanisms” (Bartunekl, 1993, p. 1223) relevant to Inside and Outside participatory members working within and across institutional settings, geography, and more.

### ***Participatory pilot evaluation of think tanks***

#### ***Overview***

This participatory evaluation is a hybrid internal and external evaluation. Each of the participatory members is affiliated with Inside-Out. Prior to the 2015 Inside-Out course evaluation (Research for Action, 2016), the participatory members conferred about their mutual interest in designing and implementing an evaluation of Inside-Out courses. We originally met through a series of annual events convened in SCI Graterford Prison for Inside-Out Advisory Boards (Executive Committee, Evaluation & Research Committee, Network Committee, Graterford Think Tank, and Temple University Advisory Board). Inside-Out Advisory Boards typically meet annually and participate in some overlapping planning sessions. These overlapping sessions allowed our team to get to know each other



and to talk face-to-face briefly about mutual interests in pursuing the current project. These overlap took place during the breaks of the Advisory Board sessions.

One participatory member – the only Outside member – is on the Inside-Out Advisory Board through the auspices of the Evaluation & Research committee. The other participatory members are on the Inside-Out Advisory Board through the auspices of their leadership in the Graterford Think Tank. The Inside participatory members are former Inside students, are founding or long-term members of the Graterford Think Tank, and have applied and college course related experiences with research. They were incarcerated at the same prison (the former SCI Graterford) and are African American males. The Outside team member participated in the Instructor Training Institute in Summer 2007 and has since taught 10 Inside-Out courses. The Outside participatory member is a tenured faculty and research methods instructor, has had professional development training in program evaluation, and has experience serving as a project evaluator elsewhere. She is based in Georgia, affiliated with a small liberal arts college, and is a white female. All participatory evaluation members were affiliated with Inside-Out, but for purposes of integrity of the project, we limited the Center's involvement.

Early on, we determined that a course evaluation was not feasible for our participatory group given our financial and intangible resources, such as easy and expedient communication among team members. For example, our team did not have the means to contract out for administration assistance with the pre- and post-questionnaire course design that was eventually implemented by Research for Action (2016). Even when our focus shifted to an evaluation of Think Tanks – a more logistically manageable participatory model – efforts to secure larger grant support for expenses were unsuccessful. In retrospect, the timing for this Think Tank evaluation was ideal, in part, because the Inside-Out course evaluation generated a lot of questions for the Center that were relevant to Think Tanks. For example, how did Think Tanks operate compared with the Center's theory and assumptions about how Think Tanks worked? Did Think Tanks have a mission statement? How did Think Tank members describe the meaning and impact of participation for themselves, the facility, or the broader community? What were some of their accomplished works, longer-term impacts, and outcomes for participants?

During proposal development, we reviewed the Think Tank Logic Model and consulted with Inside-Out staff on several topics including whether the Center was able to provide practical assistance (e.g., contact information per focus group facilitator, assistance with gate permissions when participatory members needed to arrange in person meetings at Graterford) and support costs associated with data collection (e.g., notetaker and stenographer payments). At times, these consultations were handled during person-to-person conversations between all participatory members, the Think Tank Coordinator, and the Inside-Out Associate Director during breaks at Advisory Board meetings. Most of the time, participatory team communication with the Center involved conversations between the Outside member and the Center Associate Director (and/or Think Tank Coordinator) via email correspondence and telephone conference calls.

Perhaps most important, the Outside participatory member received support from Inside-Out Center staff in preparing for communication with the appropriate Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) Research and Evaluation Department staff. The Inside-Out Associate Director had connected Research for Action (2016) evaluators with the appropriate PADOC staff regarding proposal review and needed permissions. Likewise, she provided



specific contact information on appropriate PADOc contacts who would review the evaluation proposal as well as the participatory component. This project proposal was informed by the tenets the *Inside-Out Perspectives* document. In addition, the evaluation proposal was reviewed by relevant institutional Internal Review Boards (IRB). Both IRBs determined that the activity did not meet the definition of human subjects research and therefore did not require review.

### **Roles and tasks**

Once we had a definitive project focus, we were eager to address the core elements of the project: proposal, funding options, member roles across the project phases given the differences in member access to various resources (e.g., internet access to scholarly search engines, email) and people (e.g., Think Tank facilitators), project rationale, data collection instruments, and applications for needed human subjects determinations. Regarding team member roles, we were intentional throughout this process about the need to clarify and be forthright with prison administrators and PADOc staff about how participatory members would work together, work with the data, and communicate. For example, the proposal involved the plan for only the Outside member to attend and moderate focus groups but for all participatory members to analyze focus group narrative and data provided by Inside and Outside Think Tank members including the Think Tank to which Inside participatory members belonged.

For this reason, at the appropriate time (i.e., letters of Human Subjects determinations were received, materials and instruments finalized), the Outside participatory member reached out to the appropriate staff within the PADOc Office of Research & Evaluation and presented the project proposal including details for team members' tasks. For example, Inside members were described as project advisors, a suitable project title because it acknowledged the anticipated imbalances involved in selected phases of the project. Also, the proposal included a protocol for upholding confidentiality requirements with emphasis on how this would be handled in general as well as when Inside team members had access to project data (e.g., focus group data obtained from other incarcerated people). Specifically, all narrative and quantitative data reviewed by Inside team members would be de-identified (e.g., names and locations of Think Tanks and their members removed) prior to access and review by the Inside team members. There were other required terms, including that all correspondence between the Outside team member and Inside team members was to be routed through the Inside-Out Center Think Tank coordinator, that the team has honored.

With the approval and permissions to move forward, the Outside team member traveled to SCI Graterford for a workday session with the team devoted exclusively to discussing and developing a methodological design (i.e., focus groups with a subset of existing Think Tanks moderated by the Outside team member), a proposal outline, and draft instruments. Prior to this visit, the Outside team member mailed a pre-packet of information (a "how to" guide on coding and analyzing qualitative data and selected readings on civic engagement among incarcerated people and prison educational programming) to the Inside-Out Center Graterford Think Tank liaison and asked that it be distributed to the Inside team members in advance of the work session.

For the next year and a half, project development moved forward slowly. This relative hiatus affirmed Payne and Bryant's (2018) observation that within participatory projects "time is perhaps the biggest challenge" ... "inside prisons" (pp. 464–465). During this

time, the Outside team member submitted applications for support to fund the project (all participatory members were listed as main participants for whom salaries were requested) and travel for the Outside team member. Center resources were consulted to inform instrument development (e.g., a Logic Model of Inside-Out Think Tanks and the Inside-Out Think Tank Coordinator). The participatory model would have benefited greatly from more in-person work sessions for the ability to discuss the applications and to make group decisions. It was not possible to develop project documents (e.g., Informed Consent forms) and instruments (i.e., focus group questions and a demographic information sheet for focus group participants) in a straightforward participatory manner, but all participatory members reviewed and revised data collection instruments prior to their finalization. The Inside-Out Think Tank Coordinator (a former Inside Graterford Think Tank member) provided substantial feedback on the focus group questions.

### ***Securing needed resources***

In Fall 2016, the Outside team member successfully applied for a research grant to support travel-related expenses associated with the project. These funds supported travel to the cities and facilities where focus groups were conducted. The Inside-Out Center provided support for all costs associated with notetakers or stenographer services. None of the participatory members received financial compensation for their work on the project.

### **Methodology**

In Summer and Fall 2017, nine focus groups were conducted with Inside-Out Think Tanks. Each was moderated by the Outside participatory member – an Inside-Out affiliate. This methodology was selected for a few related reasons. First, the project was designed to address Inside-Out Program information gaps, rather than to test hypotheses or make determinations or recommendations for group redirections. The participatory members believed the use of a program affiliate rather than an independent evaluator/moderator may ease Think Tank member concerns about the rationale for information gathering. Second, although focus groups are typically artificially created settings (Kratz, 2010) for evaluation or research purposes (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009), in this context the focus group structure and process offered a platform of familiarity. Inside-Out courses and Think Tanks involve circle seating and dialogic communication (Allred, 2009; Pompa, 2013a, 2013b). Hence, some Think Tank participants refer to “the circle” when describing a Think Tank. Third, the unit of analysis was the group rather than individuals. With one exception, all focus group questions were framed to gather data about the groups’ mission, visions, practices, perceived accomplishments, challenges, impacts, and more. Also, these groups differed in many respects, including in their time since establishment (group years of operation ranged from four to 20 years) and the length of time current members have participated. These collectives versus an individual informant member were best suited to answer questions about the groups. Last, the focus group format created the opportunity to hear the perspectives of all members, not just those of Outside facilitators or a sample of representative member voices.

Through the focus groups, we gathered verbatim qualitative data about the groups. The sessions were recorded using either a digital recorder or three or more notetakers per focus group, which permitted a “transcript-based analysis” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, p. 4). All

focus groups took place at the facility where Inside members were incarcerated, typically in the same room where they convened for Think Tank meetings.

### ***Site visits and participating think tanks***

Nine focus groups took place in six cities and five states (Arizona, Illinois, Oregon, Pennsylvania, West Virginia), involving 11 Inside-Out Think Tanks. Selections for sites were based on geographic location; experience as a Training Institute location; ability to secure permissions for a stenographer, notetakers, or digital recorder operated by the moderator; and willingness of Think Tank members to take part. Of those invited to take part, all agreed and were able to accommodate a means for recording the session. Participating Think Tanks were in the state ( $n = 6$ ) or federal prisons ( $n = 3$ ). There were nine to 17 attendees altogether per focus group, with an average of 12 attendees.

Four of the focus groups were recorded verbatim by the services of a stenographer, three focus group sessions were recorded with the use of paid notetakers, and two were recorded with the use of a facility approved digital recorder. Notetakers or digital recorders were utilized if the host facility or Think Tank coordinator did not support the use of a stenographer.

Two of the focus group sessions involved two combined Think Tanks. Specifically, at one facility, there were four operating Inside-Out Think Tanks. Rather than hold four separate focus group sessions, the moderator convened two focus groups – held on adjacent days – both of which involved two of the four Think Tanks at the facility.

### ***Focus group processes and questions***

Each focus group was moderated by the Outside team member. Focus group attendees ranged from nine to 17 people (Inside and Outside members) and lasted anywhere from 1 h 30 minutes to 3 h 30 minutes each. The variation in duration was directly related to how much time the facility permitted. Prior to each focus group, the moderator asked Think Tank facilitators to ask Think Tank members about their interest in and willingness to take part in this evaluation. All Think Tanks were receptive to taking part.

At the start of each focus group session, the moderator distributed an Informed Consent form and provided a verbal overview of its contents. All people who chose to take part initialed the form. Next, the moderator distributed a Think Tank Member Information Sheet. It was described as voluntary, and participants were instructed not to write identifying information on the form. Information Sheet questions asked for demographic information and responses to close-ended, Likert-type scale questions about perspectives on their Think Tank. At the completion of each focus group session, participants were given the list of the 12 questions used in the session and invited to submit written responses if they felt that they had more to add afterward. As a “validity step” (Stoecker, 1999, p. 222), when focus group sessions were recorded by notetakers, transcripts were sent back to those Think Tank facilitators. Their members were invited to review the comments and submit needed revisions to the Outside participatory member.

Before or after each focus group, the Think Tank facilitators were interviewed one-on-one by the Outside team member. Facilitators were asked background questions about the Think Tanks and questions about group history that did not need to be covered in the

focus group session. All focus groups were asked the same 12 questions. Responses to the last question, “What does this group mean to you?” are presented in the Findings section.

### ***Focus group participants***

There were 114 participants altogether in the nine focus groups. Of these, 70.8% described themselves as male and 29.2% as female. Regarding race and ethnicity, 14% described themselves as Hispanic/Latino, 35% as African American, 36% as white, 4% as Asian, and the remaining as mixed race. All people combined, the average age was 40 years. The average age for Outside members was significantly lower than the average age for Inside members (43 vs. 35 years of age), largely because most Outside members were college or graduate students, except for Think Tank facilitators who were Inside-Out trained instructors. The average length of Think Tank participation was three years for both Inside and Outside members, with a range of three months to 16 years. 57% ( $n = 65$ ) reported being Think Tank members between one and three years. Most focus group participants were Inside Think Tank members (65%).

The Information Sheet included a closed-ended question about the importance of Think Tank participation relative to other groups: “On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is a lot less and 5 is a lot more, CIRCLE the number that best describes the importance of participation in this Think Tank compared with other groups or programs you take part in.” All participants combined, the mean on this item was 4.6 out of 5 (a lot more important), and there were no differences in reported importance comparing Inside with Outside members.

### ***Coding strategy and concepts***

After four focus groups were completed and transcribed, the participatory members met at SCI Graterford for a one and one-half day work session. The Outside team member distributed de-identified copies of transcripts for each focus group to each member. The work session itinerary focused on several tasks: (a) an independent reading of the last focus group question (“What does this group mean to you?”); (b) establishment of coding processes that facilitated intercoder agreement; (c) a discussion of “first cycle coding” inductive processes and outcomes (Saldana, 2016); (d) the creation of categories with working definitions to frame associated coded data; (e) a strategy for summarizing content for the Executive Summary; and (f) a timeline for project completion.

The inductive categories or themes – civic engagement, relationships, solace, and transformation – reported in the next section were created through inductive analysis from data codes. Regarding the establishment of coding processes to facilitate intercoder agreement, due to time restrictions, members worked in pairs and focused more so on developing intercoder agreement on a just a few from the full set of categories (i.e., hope, purpose, relationships, transformation, civic engagement participation, solace, identity, social identity). First, members read through the transcripts independently. In the second readings, members assigned codes to the narrative. Last, each pair examined their codes and consolidated them into categories. While this strategy was effective during this working session, the team did not have time to implement this strategy for other focus group questions. In addition, given that the Inside members had limited access to each other outside of these meetings or their weekly Think Tank meetings, it was impossible for

them to pursue a similar strategy once the work session with the Outside member concluded. In a forthcoming trip, the members hope to apply this same strategy to remaining questions.

## Results

Considerable discussion focused on assigning labels to the categories or themes and later compiling agreed upon coded data that exemplified them. The following are the four of the eight most frequently mentioned themes across the nine focus groups. Each was an answer provided in response to “What does this Think Tank mean to you?” Not all categories were mentioned with the same frequency per focus group, but each theme was mentioned by at least one person per focus group. We use pseudonyms for people, Think Tanks, and facilities to protect the participants’ anonymity. Theme labels include the words of focus group participants in addition to those assigned by participatory members.

### *“Being able to do my part” (civic engagement)*

Out of the nine focus groups, the frequency with which civic engagement was mentioned varied. For example, in one focus group, only one person out of 13 (8%) mentioned civic engagement. In another, 7 out of the 15 (47%) said that their Think Tank was meaningful because it was a place for “being able to do my part” for “people that need our help.”

Aaron, an Inside member, said that the Think Tank is important to him because, even though the activities of the group were perceived to benefit those “on this side of the wall” and beyond, they challenged stereotypes outside people hold about incarcerated people. Aaron said,

I would say an opportunity to bring change not only on this side of the wall but also on the other side of the wall, which is even more important I think because of the stereotypes that most people think. There are people that need our help, there are people that are not doing things and not getting involved, and so if we get an opportunity to get them involved, and like me, I’m going to take this seriously when I get out.

Also, Aaron framed the group’s civic engagement as directed toward others who were incarcerated and who may too return home with newly established habits of civic engagement.

Daisey, an Outside member, was part of Aaron’s Think Tank. She too believed their Think Tank meant being civically engaged with a focus on Inside as well as Outside people but described it as a responsibility. Daisey said, “Think Tank means family responsibility, not just inside but outside, like you said, but we must take our work outside with us, and create this change for humanity, for our kids. That’s what it means to me.”

Although not stated directly, Diego, an Inside member, framed being drawn to Think Tank participation as a means for improving intragroup relationships in the prison by saying,

What it means to me is just being able to do my part in life as far as helping people, continuing to pave the way and make things easier for other people and for all of us. I think we all come from different walks of life, so we’re able to channel whatever type of influence we have and kind of take that and connect with different people out there and push positive.

Maddie, an Outside member, highlighted a personal connection. Although her mother would not benefit directly from her Think Tank participation, Maddie suggested an understanding of why these groups were important to people on the inside:

Making sure this is here for the next Inside-Out group, for the newest members and, you know, overall – because I’ve got a personal tie with the correctional system. My mother is locked up right now, and she has been in and out my entire life, and so I know how difficult it can be whenever somebody isn’t given the opportunities, you know, on the inside to make a change. This group can do that.

The focus group questions did not ask directly about civic engagement; however, on the Information Sheet distributed prior to focus group sessions, members rated on a Likert-type scale (where 1 = disagree completely and 5 = agree completely) whether “think tank activities engage members with civic issues.” The average rating, all participants combined, was 4.35, indicating much agreement. Taken together, these comments suggest that Think Tank participation is viewed by members to be civically engaging and a conduit for community building inside and beyond the walls.

### ***“This is my family” (relationships, human connections)***

The use of relationship terms symbolizes the valued, human connections that are perceived in these groups. Usage varied, with groups where two people out of 10 (20%) mentioned relationships or human connections and in another, seven out of 15 (47%) invoked familial labels: “this is my family” and “these are my brothers.”

As background, Inside-Out courses establish clear relational boundaries for students. These boundaries are discussed during the Instructor Training Institutes and include practices of semi-anonymity (e.g., using last names only); prohibitions on visits or communication between Inside and Outside students (e.g., only in-class communication is permitted); and any facility-specific rules concerning person-to-person contact (e.g., handshakes only, no other physical contact). At the beginning of each course, Inside and Outside students receive a thorough orientation on these issues, all of which help maintain the learning environment. Based on anecdotal feedback to the Outside team member during focus group sessions, it appeared that Think Tank members believed these boundaries were to be maintained for Think Tanks.

Ramona, an Inside member, described a dual meaning associated with being in the Think Tank, feeling valued in a manner associated with family:

To me, being in here is to realize also that I have – that I’m somebody special. I’m someone who’s very important and what I say means something. This is like my family away from my family. They make me feel so appreciated. It’s like we hugging now without even touching. So, it’s so sacred.

Raakel was an Outside member of Ramona’s Think Tank and affirmed this family-like quality of Think Tanks:

We are like a family. We do give air hugs at the end because we can’t really embrace, and it is like being away from your family, you just have someone to just connect with and it’s just – it’s a good feeling. It’s a feeling that you don’t want to let go of; you just want to keep holding on to. I really love these guys. I do and that’s hard for me, I really love these guys.



Cory, an Inside member, described a broader relational value, one more community oriented. He accounted for the meaning of Think Tank participation by saying, “This group has allowed me to be me – to feel like a person again. It has improved relationships within this prison and with others.”

Pamela, an Outside member, graduated from college but returned to the area and resumed her involvement with the Think Tank. She described a group where she had meaningful conversations with people she cared about:

I think [Think Tank Name] is one of the places where I have the best conversations and where I’m challenged to think about things in a different way and have powerful conversations about issues that I care about. It’s been a real source of continuity in my life, especially coming back to this group after two years away and being able to pick up and see people I care about. I’m thinking that the last part is it’s a group that’s filled with people that I really care about, look forward to seeing, and who I’ve known since I was 19 years old, at least some here. So, I think all of that together makes it wonderful.

Joe was an Inside member who described the meaning of membership as a form of social identity: a group of people he belonged to is perceived as an important source of pride and self-esteem. Further, Joe compared this identity to concepts of kin (brothers and family):

This is the one identifier that I like, and I scream it from the rooftops, these are my brothers, this is my family. You truly are just core characters; that’s what this Think Tank means to me. This is truly my – you’re truly my identity.

In the context of Inside-Out Think Tanks, the assignment of family qualities to the relational aspects of participation suggested their endearing group dynamics.

### ***“Being real” and “we’re always here for you” (solace)***

Solace is a term to represent participants’ perceptions that “the circle” involved genuine encounters and a “safe space.” In one focus group, one person out of five who spoke (10%) mentioned that the Think Tank was meaningful because it offered this type of comfort. In another, six out of 14 (43%) mentioned this theme as characteristic of the setting.

Angel is an Inside member who values the opportunity to learn in a context where he can experience genuine, human connections, unlike those in the broader prison environment:

It was eye-opening for me because there are a lot of things that you think about whenever you would come into a facility like this, but the things in here have brought me a lot of knowledge. So, too I can leave everything on the outside (of Think Tank meetings) and come in and be around guys that have so much knowledge and what they speak is very powerful, and you can’t get that on the outside sometimes with anybody. I can’t be real with somebody without being attacked in some way in most places, so to be able to come in and just be real with people means a lot. It is a space to “be real” and to show members “we’re always here for you.”

Steven, an Inside Think Tank member, attributes his emotional and personal well-being to the relationships, ambiance, and comfort of the group:

This is a place I can express myself and feel comfortable asking questions. A lot of people have died in my family in the past 45 years and this class has helped me overcome that. I might have fallen if it wasn’t for this Think Tank. I would be nothing. I get to be me in the Think Tank more than I get to be me anywhere else.

Amberson, an Inside Think Tank member, mentioned more than one theme (civic engagement and solace) to express the meaning of Think Tank participation for him. His most powerful statements were that he felt “relevant” and “cared about” in the circle. “These things here are what, really, I get from this, the perspective that I’m still relevant. And I can still make a difference in someone’s life in a positive way now, and that I’m also cared about.”

Taken together, these comments suggest some underlying emotions associated with membership, in part, because of the comfort and relief experienced within Think Tanks.

### ***“Changing into a better person” (transformation)***

Melissa Crabbe (2013), former Inside-Out Associate Director, recounts conversations with colleagues who described Inside-Out courses as “transformative education” (p. 27). But, are Think Tanks, products of Inside-Out courses, also transformative? If so, is the transformation apparent in people, the prison, in broader connections, or some combination? Are Think Tanks meaningful because members perceive changes in themselves, changes in “larger-scale social networks, communities, and institutions,” or both (Crabbe, 2013, p. 27)? Codes associated with transformation were identified in all nine focus groups. In one focus group, two out of seven (28%) who spoke mentioned transformation. In another focus group, seven out of 12 (58%) participants said that their Think Tank “changed my life” or was an agent promoting “constant evolution” or “change into a better person.”

Mason, an Outside Think Tank member, shared that participation prompted a significant change in his college major and professional aspirations, a change he felt was more in sync with his values and goals:

I guess for me specifically it really changed my – my career path and what my goals were in my life. I mean I switched out of engineering because of the values that I had and the personal goals I had didn’t match up with being an engineer. Being in criminology and psychology kind of fits me a bit better but being in here kind of – I don’t know, gave me much more direction.

Caleb, an Inside member, described a perception of individual change, positive transformation into the civically engaged person he felt he was meant to be:

Finally, I get here in Inside-Out and then this Think Tank. It has provided me a means to do good finally for the first time in my life. A means to grow in a positive sense. And for the first time, it feels like I am floating to outer space, and not just fighting gravity. So, it has given me a proper perspective of who I am, and what I’m meant to do. And, it’s invigorating because it’s allowing me to be who I am while at the same time giving me hope to be somebody better tomorrow and the next day.

Dawn, an Outside member, said that a revised career path was a meaningful, individual transformation:

It changed my career path a little bit, too. I was going to be a police officer, but I completely changed and now I’m planning to work within something that has to do with helping those who are getting out [of prison] and being on the other side of it. I see myself now trying to help more and in a different way

Sid, an Inside member, experienced a dual meaning associated with Think Tank participation – individual as well as larger-scale change (Crabbe, 2013) – that was significant for him. He said, “This group is a place where I can have a voice and a hand and effect change in the culture of prisons and corrections. And, it is also a place where I can change myself, evolve, grow, and learn.”

Tye, an Inside member, described with detail the nature of individual change she attributed to Think Tank participation. She also shared how these changes manifest in her impact – perhaps unbeknownst to others – on other women in the facility, women who were not Think Tank participants:

For me this group has taught me it's not about me anymore, it's not I. I know that I'm more open to people to help, especially my roommate who has been down for almost three years. She wasn't involved in anything. She just said, "I'm in prison." She had just been in and out but now she views things in a different way, she's doing her GED, she's more involved in her family's life. All that just because of the positive change that she has seen in me and the encouragement that I have given to her and other women in the compound. Before I was making changes, I just leave her alone. But, now I go through all the way with people, even if I feel discouraged I'm still there trying to encourage them to come to the chapel, etc., to be with me. I'll give them little assignments to do and keep on encouraging them because I've never had like a mother figure or role model. But now, I became one to them. I just spend time with them, just tell them that they are better than that and that this is not really like a prison. I tell them not to look at this time spent like in prison. I tell them it is a way to change them, like it's a school that they're going to for training and that way when they go out they become a better mother, a better sister, or a better wife.

This analysis found evidence of transformation – individual and broader community reaching – among the experiences of Inside and Outside Think Tank members. They view the circle as the key reason for the individual change and an impetus to impact the prison environment.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

These themes represent attributions of meaning to Think Tank participation. They are strong indications of ongoing processes that, according to assessments of Inside-Out Courses and the Think Tank Logic Model, are largely anticipated, broad extensions of the course experiential and implementing community building activities, individual growth, human development, and social capital increases (e.g., leadership and other social skill development), and personal identity shifts. Last, although not framed as a program goal or outcome, these findings resonate with phases of desistance processes described elsewhere.

### ***“Being able to do my part” (civic engagement)***

The setting for Think Tank civic engagement and community building is the same across prison environments: the “laws, rules, and regulations predominate” and the regimes and discipline operate to “isolate and separate” (Behan, 2014, p. 145). And, there are limited opportunities in correctional settings to “make amends” (Horan, 2015, p. 149), to dispel stereotypes (Perry, 2013, p. 36), or to implement prisoner initiated, positive change to the prison environment. Think Tank members report that these groups provide members – Inside and Outside – with settings where they actively and with agency develop and implement endeavors that they believe “do

good” for their immediate prison communities, individuals outside the circle, both within and beyond the prisons. The quotes from Aaron, Daisey, and Deigo exemplify a powerful undercurrent, one that demonstrates a phenomenon deeper than a set of activities launched and/or completed. Through civic engagement activities, these groups have constructed a social structure and culture of influence that extends well into the prisons where they exist.

### ***“This is my family” (relationships, human connections)***

The findings reveal that the Think Tank experience builds upon the relational learning – learning through relationships with and from the perspectives of others – that begins in the Inside-Out courses (Allred et al., 2013). Further, they echo descriptions of one of the “stages of desistance” (Horan, 2015, p. 149), specifically “tertiary desistance,” wherein people reach a point where they shift their “sense of belonging to a different (moral) community” (p. 149). These participants used the language of human connections, kin, family, etc., to refer to the community they have established in the circle. Part-and-parcel to this community building and concomitant identity shift is an acceptance of group norms that involves behavioral standards (McNeill, 2014). In the case of Think Tanks, adherence to such standards are as necessary for access as they are for maintaining membership. Caleb and Sid allude to this type of identity shift and connection with the group culture and normative expectations.

Thus, relationships and a sense of community are described as central and defining. This type of relational framing and grounding has been found elsewhere, in diverse settings (e.g., Inside-Out courses, restorative justice practices, civic learning programs, juvenile rehabilitation programs) (Allred et al., 2013; Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Bernstein, 2014; Heider, 2018; Horan, 2015; McNeill et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006)

### ***“Being real” and “we’re always here for you” (solace)***

Think Tank members valued participation, in part, because it offered a sharp contrast to prison life. Where severe disruptions in normal relationships and bonds prevail (McCoy, 2012), the Think Tank experience offers an oasis in the atmosphere and a time to “be real.” The structure and culture of Think Tanks (e.g., non-hierarchical roles, non-bureaucratic processes, eligibility criteria, relational rules) are a driving force for co-created outcomes described as trust, safe encounters, and respect for people.

### ***“Changing into a better person” (transformation)***

Inside-Out courses have been described as transformative: learning that involves growth and change (Pompa, 2013b). Here, too, Think Tank members reported experiences with “individual and larger scale” transformation (Crabbe, 2013). Regarding individual changes, expressions of individual development were mentioned directly and indirectly across thematic areas. More important, they suggest that as Think Tanks organically facilitate “human and social capital” development (Horan, p. 151) they may also enable an unanticipated outcome, desistance from crime within and beyond the prison experience.

### ***Lessons, limitations, and contributions***

**Lessons.** This participatory evaluation approach reveals some important insights. First, participatory projects involve lengthy timelines compared with research models where the academic scholar is *the* researcher (Payne & Bryant, 2018, p. 458). As a participatory prison program evaluation project, the timeline was extensive.

The needed reviews and permissions from relevant institutions and organizations (e.g., state DOC offices, facility administrators, academic IRB) required carefully sequenced communication as well as detailed documentation on all elements of the project, especially aspects relevant to the concerns and perspectives of the myriad stakeholders. Contacting the correct positions within organizations, scheduling conference calls, drafting replies to follow-up questions, and so on was very time-consuming.

Because prisons restrict the communication of people incarcerated, exchanges among participatory team members were challenging. People in prisons do not have unrestricted rights to use the phone, they may lose telephone privileges, and rates on calls to/from prisons are expensive. Conventional postal delivery service communication is time-consuming. Communication by email is not available at all prisons; not all people incarcerated are granted access to telecommunications systems (e.g., ConnectNetwork); and prison-based telecommunications systems tend to have limits on characters. This participatory project benefited from members' access to a telecommunications system and an Inside-Out staff liaison who was able to hand-deliver project resources (e.g., textbook on coding strategies) from the Outside participatory member. This last means of communication was helpful but was not employed to deliver the focus group narrative data.

A second lesson concerned the writing process: flexibility and patience matter. In participatory evaluation writing, Stoecker (1999) describes situations when collaborative writing does not work: it may not be possible for all groups to contribute, some may have less time than others for writing, some may have stronger skill sets in report writing, etc. Other issues hindered collaboration on this manuscript, including the unanticipated closing of the prison where the Inside participatory team members were incarcerated. Thus, the participatory writing model envisioned for this manuscript differed from the actual experience, but not by choice.

**Limitations.** The project has limitations, and the implications offered are best considered with them in mind. One, Inside Think Tank members may be different compared with other incarcerated people or those in other prison educational programs. Not all Inside students are able or opt to participate in a Think Tank. Those who have participated have done so on average for three years. For comparison, the average time served in state prison in the United States, from the point of initial admission to initial release was 2.6 years in 2016 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018, p. 1). Outside Think Tank student members may be different from other college students. The typical Outside student is an upper-level undergraduate. Assessments of Inside-Out courses reflect an overrepresentation of females (e.g., Allred, 2009; Allred, Harrison, & O'Connell, 2013; Research for Action, 2016) relative to their representation in the broader college population. And, as with Inside students, not all Outside students choose or are able to participate in a Think Tank. Think Tanks also have upper limits for membership

Two, although these focus groups resembled the typical interactional format of Think Tanks, as a methodology, focus groups present a range of potential deficiencies. Potential concerns, for example, relate to the moderator skills, participant characteristics, and the

participants' "emotional stake in the topic" (Kidd & Parshall, 2000, p. 294), which we estimate as high in this context.

**Contributions.** Our focus departs from typical assessments where the processes or outcomes measured were recidivism, employment rates, or behavioral problems in custodial settings (Davis et al., 2013). Our data are self-reports from program participants whose answers tell us a deeper story about the value of this type of prison program. To begin, they offer direct "reflections from the agent in question" (Vaughan, 2007, p. 390) about why incarcerated people take part in voluntary, prison programming and college students take part in elective, prison-based programs. These accounts highlight how Inside and Outside participants are impacted and in turn impact outside the circle.

The themes expressed by Inside participants yield glimpses into the "internal narrative of desistance" (Vaughan, 2007, p. 390), one that is ongoing and forward thinking. Because the same themes of individual transformation, civic engagement, and more were expressed by Outside members, this reflects an emerging "citizen identity" among Inside and Outside (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 107) Think Tank members.

Third, although an external evaluator may have offered the assessment a more traditional base of impartiality, we believe that this participatory approach minimized biases through ongoing, reflective dialogue about processes and analyses. The in-person work sessions provided opportunities to share insights from our respective experiences and helped with reliability and validity issues. Any weaknesses attributable to concerns with objectivity are best weighed against gains from a grounded and collective insight that informed the methodological approach, framing of study questions, analyses, and views about implications.

### **Implications for research**

The results point to areas of mutual interest between two groups: educators who seek to "rethink civic learning" (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 107) and the role of "civic learning styles" (p. 108) in community-engaged curriculum development, and evaluators who assess the relative strengths, outputs, and/or outcomes of various prison program models. One direction for future study in corrections is a comparative assessment of approaches, one involving programs with diversity in terms of structured, sustained engagement with outside groups as program participants. Comparisons of prison programming may consider those where engagement with outside people is more hierarchical (e.g., teacher-student relationships), involves less reciprocity in the learning experience, or is absent altogether. Also, comparisons of programs with measurable differences in structure and culture may want to assess their relative impacts on the nature and extent of human development and whether gains through the program are transferred to leadership in other prison programs.

This project found that the relational and community component within Think Tanks was meaningful for Inside and Outside people alike. This finding is consistent with those reported elsewhere within the broader community engagement, service-learning, and civic learning literatures. For example, Bennett et al. (2009) find that civic identity development among younger cohorts is more responsive to participatory, interactive, project-based learning styles (p. 108). Sandy and Holland (2006) conclude that relationships among community-based learning partners are "foundational" (p 33). Thus, some areas for future



inquiry may include why and how community building and civic orientations may develop mutually among community partners in other settings. What short-term and long-term outcomes result *because* of the human relationships and sense of community that are forged in place-based, “tiny publics” (Fine & Harrington, 2004) where civic engagement progresses from small group interactions involving incarcerated people or other marginalized populations (Horan, 2015, p. 149)?

### **Implications for correctional practices**

Despite possible facility concerns with programs premised on sustained engagement between inside and outside people, some program approaches may have more strengths as evidenced in human capital and community building outcomes because of this component. Correctional education programs with rigorous instructor preparation and support are important considerations. The Inside-Out Program requires an unparalleled Instructor Training experience, one with yields of measured program fidelity (Research for Action, 2016) and established programs in a range of correctional settings in the United States and abroad. In addition, Inside-Out courses and their Think Tanks are cost-effective. The trained Inside-Out instructors and Think Tank Outside facilitators are compensated through their educational institutions.

Another implication for correctional practices concerns the nature and reach of this type of prison programming. At first glance, Inside-Out Think Tanks appear to be small and limited in terms of the number of people who may participate and thus benefit. The Think Tanks in this assessment involved between nine to 17 people. It is important to note, however, that the leadership and related human capital skills that develop in Think Tanks resonated out into the facilities and impacted the general population and other prison programs. Inside Think Tank participants apply their skills, knowledge, and acquired self-efficacy to leadership in other prison programs. Inside participants also represent role models for people in the general prison population and view themselves as active agents of “change in the culture of prisons” (Sid, Think Tank Participant). In these specific ways and more, Think Tanks demonstrate the powerful potential of community building that emerges from this type of prison program.

In correctional facilities, this program is far more than an economical asset to existing offerings, one with straightforwardly measurable, diverse, and positive outcomes. This prison program supports and builds people and fosters community within and beyond the circle. In this sense, Think Tanks may be viewed as a “humanitarian movement that is relevant and necessary to our world” (C. Boyd, personal communication, August 2017).

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