4 Inmate DEBATERS defeat Texas A&M in first-ever competition behind bars

10 Student Success LABS provide technology and resources that enhance classroom learning

14 Huntsville Center GRADS partner in HVAC business
Dean's Corner

Donna Zuniga, Dean, Lee College Huntsville Center

The Lee College Huntsville Center has been truly blessed to offer academic and technical programs to offenders incarcerated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice since 1966. As we celebrate our 50th Anniversary I’m reminded of our humble beginnings when four instructors from the Baytown campus would drive to Huntsville every week to provide college instruction to a limited number of students at three TDCJ units.

We proudly celebrate the fruits of those early efforts today and celebrate the technical program certificates and associate degrees earned by literally tens of thousands of offenders who believed in a ‘second chance’. They also decided to entrust their futures with numerous instructors, administrators and staff members who share a common interest and commitment to serve a special population of learners behind the razor wire.

Education truly knows ‘no boundaries’. While challenges are common in a correctional environment, the academic achievements and success stories of offenders upon release from TDCJ provide a constant reminder of the hard work and personal fortitude attributed to every Lee College student who believes he’s better than a TDCJ number. Family members also deserve a huge amount of credit for supporting their loved ones and believing that education may serve as the best form of rehabilitation while incarcerated.

Today, Lee College is proud to participate in the Second Chance Pell Grant Pilot program. As one of 67 college programs selected by the U.S. Department of Education, Lee College is excited to share the benefits of higher education with increased enrollment for the fall and spring semesters. Additional noteworthy achievements include the stunning upset of the Texas A&M Speech and Debate Team by the Huntsville Center Debate Team at the inaugural George Beto Invitational Debate held at the Huntsville Unit in October.

As we look forward to a bright future, the Huntsville Center acknowledges the tremendous support of its Board of Regents, state legislators, grant partners, TDCJ Unit Wardens and staff, Rehabilitations Programs Division, and most of all, our former students who continue to pay it forward. Lastly, a three year Rand Corporation study on the effectiveness of correctional education programs revealed for every $1 dollar invested in education programs...a cost savings of $5 is generated which is equivalent to a 400 percent savings to taxpayers based on lower recidivism rates. As the Huntsville Center Dean, it’s my extreme pleasure to play a small role in such a great legacy which has now encompassed over 50 years and still counting!
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HONORING 50 YEARS OF ADVOCACY & REDEMPTION THROUGH EDUCATION
THE GREAT DEBATE
HUNTSVILLE, TX –

As they sat inside the chapel of the Huntsville “Walls” Unit prison awaiting the start of the first-ever George Beto Invitational Debate, the inmate debaters from the Lee College Huntsville Center were well-aware of the long odds they faced – incarcerated convicts with few academic credentials and limited access to news and information about the outside world, competing against the award-winning debate team from Texas A&M University.

But after both teams had laid out their cases for and against the resolution that Donald Trump’s Achilles’ heel is foreign policy, it was the inmates who defeated the Aggies in a 3-2 decision. To Craig Caudill and Troy Thoele, who debated for Lee College, the victory was reminiscent of David’s triumph over Goliath.

“I feel like I just made parole,” Caudill joked when Lee College was announced the winner and the entire chapel – inmates, wardens and correctional officers, spectators and even the students and coaches from Texas A&M – burst into enthusiastic applause.

“I’m a little overwhelmed. The level of intellect the team from Texas A&M had was amazing,” Caudill said. “Nobody expected us to win. But just because we’re in prison, it doesn’t mean we haven’t tried to change or don’t want to change. Debate has given us better cognitive thinking skills that we can use to function in a free world setting.”

Preparing to Take on the Aggies

For six months, the Lee College team trained as often as they could within the confines of their strict prison schedule: huddling together on the yard to sharpen their arguments; squeezing in extra practice during study hall in the unit’s education area; and even facing off against coaches Adam Key and Jeremy Coffman, champion debaters themselves with nearly a dozen national titles between them.

“Eight years I’ve coached and this is about as proud as I’ve ever been,” said Key, a Texas A&M doctoral student and full-time speech instructor for the Lee College Huntsville Center who began recruiting students for the inmate debate team just one year ago. “I’ve never seen a group of debaters this motivated. They’ve picked up in a couple of months what others take years to learn. Every spare moment they had, they wanted to practice more.”

To ensure an even playing field for competition, neither team was given advance knowledge of the resolution to be debated.

After narrowing down their topic from a list of five options, the teams were provided the same research materials and 30 minutes to prepare their cases before taking to the podium. Caudill and Thoele gathered in the back of the chapel with their teammates and coaches, scanning newspaper articles for information and bouncing ideas and potential angles around the group.

“This enhances their self-esteem, which impacts their success when they leave prison. Just to be a part of it is an honor,” said Madeline Ortiz, director of the Rehabilitation Programs Division of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, as she watched the inmates formulate their case before the debate began.

“For many, their trajectory into crime began in middle school. Now, they’re focused on the right kind of thinking instead of the habitual thinking that got them here,” Ortiz said. “All of the instructors treat them with respect, their college curriculum is the same as it would be on the outside and the expectations are the same. This gives them a chance in a life.”

“A lot of inmates know the guys on the team, and it’s a big plus for them to be involved. It requires them to make positive changes in their behavior; if they don’t do the right things, they aren’t able to participate. Seeing them do well makes the other inmates want to do the same.”

-James Jones, Senior Warden

Inmate Debaters Defeat Texas A&M In First-Ever Competition Behind Bars
Arguing the Case and Taking Home a Win

Lee College built their argument around Trump’s rise to the top of the Republican presidential ticket despite his controversial remarks, his unstable foreign policy approach that could jeopardize America’s relationships with other countries and inability to be a strong and respected leader.

Michael Buse and Anthony Nguyen of Texas A&M argued that Trump’s primary weakness is actually his temperament, which has caused him to speak and behave in a way that has alienated women and minority voters and made him less likely to accept counsel from advisers.

A panel of five judges – Hassan Assad, a professional wrestler better known by the moniker “MVP;” Jason Bay, pastor of First Baptist Church Huntsville; Dessie Cherry, a former warden and retiree from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice; Allen Hightower, a former Texas legislator; and Raymond Middleton, a volunteer chaplain at the Walls Unit – ultimately decided the inmate debaters had best proved their case.

Rather than being disappointed at their loss, Buse and Nguyen were grateful for the opportunity to participate in such an historic event and pleasantly surprised by how much they had in common with prison inmates.

“I didn’t know what to expect when we came in,” said Buse, a junior political science major. “It was really impressive to see how articulate and thoughtful our opponents were, and it was amazing to see what education can really do: give everyone an opportunity to succeed.”

For Assad, a convicted felon himself who overcame his rocky past to become a world champion wrestler, judging the debate competition was a chance to remind the inmates that there is life after prison if they had the courage to get up and stand proud in the face of adversity.

“This is the only time I’ve ever been excited to come back to prison,” said Assad, who was just 16 when he was sent to prison in Florida and served more than 9 years before being released. “The ability to be an effective communicator is key to your success in life. People are going to judge you by the fact that you’re a convicted felon, but you have the opportunity to disarm them with your words.”

Earning a Victory For All at “The Walls”

Though Caudill and Thoele were the only ones to take the stage, both described the Lee College victory as a group effort. The support they received from all 12 of their teammates and coaches was an invaluable, and their fellow inmates...
throughout the prison -- even those not enrolled in Lee College -- were excited about the debate and offered the team words of encouragement and best wishes.

“I'm proud of everybody,” said Thoele, one of more than 1,200 incarcerated students pursuing associate degrees and certificates through the Lee College Huntsville Center. “The entire unit supported us. Debating and taking college classes have made me a role model and an example for other guys. I hope this motivates them to do something to better themselves.”

Senior Warden James Jones and Assistant Warden Matt Dobbins of the Walls Unit were also essential to the debate team’s success and instrumental in making the program a reality behind bars.

“Lee College and I have always had a good relationship, so when they came to me with the idea for a debate team and we discussed it, I saw it as something positive and encouraging for the whole inmate population,” Jones said. “A lot of inmates know the guys on the team, and it’s a big plus for them to be involved. It requires them to make positive changes in their behavior; if they don’t do the right things, they aren’t able to participate. Seeing them do well makes the other inmates want to do the same.”

Dobbins agreed, praising the hard work of the debate team members and the dedication of the instructors who readied them for the rigors of competition.

“These guys are excited and they’re proud,” Dobbins said. “Religious and educational programs and activities like the debate team and college courses do nothing but help inmates and promote positive change. I personally hope this debate leads to even bigger and better things.”

And if debate team coach Key has anything to do it, those hopes will come true.

“This is a group of people who have good excuses to not want to do this, but they’ve never looked at themselves as underdogs,” Key said. “They’ve seen themselves as the Lee College Huntsville Center Debate Team and they believe they are among the best in the nation. When they get released and find jobs, they’re not going to be just workers. They’re not just going to be citizens. They’re going to be engaged citizens who have found their voices and know how to use them.”

“The ability to be an effective communicator is key to your success in life. People are going to judge you by the fact that you’re a convicted felon, but you have the opportunity to disarm them with your words.”

-Hassan Assad
After completing two tours of duty in Iraq as part of his 6-year military career, U.S. Army veteran Michael Rogers found himself medically retired and turning to alcohol to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder.

A 10-year prison sentence for intoxication manslaughter soon followed—but so did his enrollment in the Lee College Huntsville Center Horticulture Program, and the realization that spending time in the O.B. Ellis Unit garden, working in the greenhouse with his hands in the earth, was the remedy he needed.

Horticulture Program Wins $3,000 Grant for Therapeutic Garden on Unit Grounds
“Being in this class helped alleviate many of the issues related to my time in Iraq,” said Rogers, part of a team of students who helped horticulture instructor James “Scooter” Langley, Jr., win a $3,000 grant from the National Garden Bureau to expand the unit’s therapeutic garden.

The Huntsville Center horticulture program was selected from among thousands of organizations around the country that submitted video applications for the bureau’s annual “Growing for Futures” grant program. More than 67,000 viewers watched the videos online and picked their favorite, pushing Lee College into first place with more than 32,000 votes -- double the number of votes received by the second-place winner.

“I never could have thought of the impact this class would have on me. I have started to plan goals again and believe my future will be better because of this program,” Rogers said. “Due to the hands-on knowledge and degree I will obtain, I plan to use whatever available resources I can to start my own small farm and sell what I grow at the local farmer’s market and eventually help other veterans see the therapeutic benefits of horticulture.”

The National Garden Bureau grant money will be used to add a true, old-fashioned antique garden featuring hybrid tea roses to the existing Aviary and Therapeutic Garden at the Ellis Unit; increase the size of the aviary and add additional breeding boxes, birds and supplies; and enhance its aquaponics by expanding the number of grow beds and acquiring all the equipment, chemicals and training materials necessary to breed the fish used in the tanks.

“A lot of these guys haven’t taken care of anything but themselves,” Langley said, noting that many of the students who tend the therapeutic garden are former military or gang members who have known or committed acts of violence in the past. “It’s very therapeutic to them to get their hands dirty and care for something as small as a parakeet; they’re in their own little world. This project has taught them that now they have a chance to give back and do something better with their lives.”

Jacob Reyes had been incarcerated for 13 years when he found the horticulture program and began working in the Aviary and Therapeutic Garden. Now – with six parakeets under his care and dreams of breeding, raising and training even more birds to comfort children in difficult situations – he sees life through a brand new set of eyes and aspires to help others more than himself.

“I find freedom even though I am behind chain-linked fences and rows of razor wire. It takes time and patience, something I never had,” said Reyes, who also enjoys landscaping and beautifying the garden with different types of plants and flowers. “This class is just amazing, with an instructor who cares and looks past the color of our clothes and the number behind our name. He wants us to learn everything we can so when we get out, we can show everyone we can change. Yes, we made mistakes, but given another chance we can make it.”
For all that faculty and staff do to ensure Lee College Huntsville Center students receive the same high-quality education as their peers at the Baytown campus, some challenges of working with incarcerated students are harder to overcome than others – like providing access to computers, the Internet and other digital electronics the outside world relies on everyday that are scarcely available to inmates inside.

“The statistics are clear: post-secondary education in prison makes a difference in recidivism and whether or not they re-offend,” said Jeannie Colson, librarian for the Huntsville Center. “But virtually everything you do for students these days is electronic, and a large number of our students have never even clicked a mouse.”

Seeing an opportunity to prepare students to enter the modern era by enhancing their computer and information literacy, Huntsville Center librarian Jeannie Colson wrote and Lee College was awarded a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Texas State Library and Archives Commission to purchase the eGranary Digital Library: an innovative offline information store, also known as “The Internet in a Box,” that gives Huntsville Center students access to millions of multimedia documents within a closed and secure local area network.

After starting off with one system at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s (TDCJ) Wynne Unit, the eGranary Digital Library is now in place at Student Success Labs in three of the six TDCJ units where Lee College classes are held. Labs at the remaining units are slated to have eGranary installed in the coming months, and instructors are being encouraged to develop more technology-based assignments that require students to practice using the computers.

“We recognize their need for information,” Colson said. “They have to know how to construct good searches to find exactly what they’re looking for, and evaluate their results and findings. It brings in the research side of college-level study and is already going over very well with our students. I know it is going to make a difference to them.”

The eGranary Digital Library comes with a built-in proxy and search engine that mimics the Internet experience. A security system inside the software monitors what students do and view, and the college is tracking user information, computer usage rates and other data to help ensure the labs are effective and being used in the proper manner.
“We have to consider safety and security in all things that we do, while also being aware that these people will re-integrate into society and without experience working with technology, they’ll be at a disadvantage,” said Donna Zuniga, dean of the Huntsville Center. This opens a bridge, broadening our students' knowledge base.

Along with the eGranary Digital Library, the Student Success Labs on each TDCJ unit offer a host of additional support services for both students and instructors that help reinforce and expand classroom learning. Students have access to instructional material, computers and Lee College staff members and counselors who provide one-on-one attention and individual help with assignments.

“Three semesters ago, I worked with a student who had never gotten to use a computer before,” said Cynthia Lewis, an instructional lab monitor who has worked with the Lee College Huntsville Center for more than a decade. “Now he's helping others to use them. I've seen students come in with grades in the 40s and 50s who are able to raise them to the 80s and 90s. Sooner or later, these guys are going to leave prison and we are here to make sure they can be as successful as possible.”

Lab monitor Diane Carpenter said she and Lewis are further able to help students by sharpening the soft skills that get lost behind bars, like looking an authority figure in the eye and interacting confidently in social situations.

“They're people, they've made an error and they're paying for it,” Carpenter said. "But they're also Lee College students, and they know they don't want to come back to prison. There are skills they have to have when the move on from TDCJ, and we teach them those skills.”

Each Student Success Lab also has study hall space where students can meet with peer tutors who are embedded in classes, in communication with instructors and knowledgeable about course content and expectations. Tutors are on site at all times and must meet several requirements to be selected, including submitting a detailed application; getting teacher recommendations; identifying their areas of expertise; providing transcripts of their grades; and completing a mandatory training session.

“It’s definitely a privilege; tutors have to be above reproach at all times and it’s really difficult to get that role,” said Amanda Reynolds, an English instructor for the Huntsville Center who also coordinates the tutor program and has worked with at-risk student populations throughout her career as an educator. “The tutors and labs are an important resource and if students are willing to use them, they can be a big help.”

With Lee College celebrating the 50-year legacy and achievements of the Huntsville Center, Academic Division Chairman Paul Allen counts the development of the Student Success Labs and incorporation of computers, the eGranary Digital Library and other technology among the signs the program can and must keep moving forward.

“We want our students to have the same quality of education as others in the free world,” Allen said. “There’s a new dynamic within our program: a facility within the unit designated for Lee College and designated for learning. It’s amazing how they take ownership of these labs. It’s unparalleled in correctional education today.”
Retirees Find Fresh Inspiration and New Purpose as Teachers on the Inside

On the first day of one of his most memorable classes as an adjunct math instructor for the Lee College Huntsville Center, retired high school teacher and administrator Ray Wright passed out the syllabus detailing the assignments for the course and prepared to meet with his students again in three weeks, following a holiday.

By the time his students slid back into their seats in Wright’s classroom inside the prison unit, they had already completed all of the written work for the term and were so hungry for more information he could read it on their faces.

It was the kind of moment that would make any instructor proud and excited about the upcoming semester, but for Wright – who has taught algebra and other topics part-time to inmates incarcerated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) – it inspired awe.
“These students excel beyond my expectations,” said Wright, who has spent the last 7 years working as an adjunct instructor at the six TDCJ units where the Huntsville Center operates. “I’ve always enjoyed watching other people progress; to see that light come on is serendipity. Students can be afraid of the subject matter, but it’s a good experience to watch these young inmates take on something and realize it’s not that hard, they’re not stupid, they’re not slow.”

Like many of the instructors who take on the challenge of correctional education after retiring from another career, Wright is often asked if he is fearful of traveling beyond the razor wire to teach convicted felons. In truth, there was only one day when the clang of the bars and journey inside the heart of the prison: his first on the job.

“Teaching has always been my first love, and in many ways, it’s not that different than teaching in public schools,” said Wright, who advocates a teaching philosophy that recognizes confusion as the beginning of learning; learning as the beginning of knowledge; knowledge as the beginning of wisdom; and wisdom as the ability to use what you know to your advantage.

“Who are we to judge? We’ve all made mistakes,” he said. “The students are well-behaved, attendance is always near perfect and most of them really want to be there. We have a lot of fun, there is a lot of class interaction and occasionally you get around to mathematics.”

Chuck Ellis, Developmental Math Instructor

Chuck Ellis, who has taught developmental math for nearly 20 years as an adjunct instructor for the Huntsville Center, starts each of his new classes on the unit with a simple announcement.

“I tell them the next Einstein is sitting in the room and we’re going to find him,” said Ellis, a retired U.S. Navy officer who spent 31 years on the submarine force, taught at Georgia Military College before returning to Texas and helped recruit Wright and other instructors to second careers at the college. “Education is the key that unlocks the door to opportunity.”

Among his fondest experiences as an adjunct instructor is attending the annual graduation ceremony at the Wynne Unit, where inmates cover their white prison uniforms with long black robes and don tasseled mortarboards. He feels good knowing he has helped a student progress despite the odds they face and the mistakes they are trying to overcome.

“A lot of guys in prison have their head own, but a college student has pep in his step. They can see there are opportunities available to them. They may have never been successful at anything and being successful in college sets them apart.”

Don Harris, Art History and Art Appreciation Instructor

A retired U.S. Army Colonel who spent 30 years as an artillery officer at posts all over the world, Don Harris shares Ellis’ military education experience and believes his extensive travels give him a personal connection that has proven valuable as an instructor of art history and art appreciation for the Huntsville Center.

“Nearly everything I teach these students, I’ve seen. I’ve been in the country, I’ve lived in the country, I’ve been a part of it all,” Harris said. “When you’re able to say ‘this is what I’ve seen,’ it means more than the textbook. It opens their eyes to the world, something they’ve never had in high school or college. We add a whole new perspective.”

After a few semesters inside the prison, he began to notice students were willing to stand in line to sign up for his classes, where he used traditional slides and then PowerPoint to add a visual element to the artistic exploration. His classroom is filled with students whose abilities and commitment to education impress him.

“In the prison system, the attitude is totally different. You realize a student cares, that they want to ask you questions, that these guys are there to learn. It creates a mutual respect between student and instructor,” Harris said. “These are guys trying to make a new life for themselves. They challenge me. I want to meet their expectations as an instructor.”

Robert Vann, History Instructor

After retiring first from the U.S. Air Force and later TDCJ’s Windham School District, a friend suggested Robert Vann would likely enjoy putting his master’s degree in history to good use as an adjunct instructor for the Huntsville Center.

He had already taught at public schools and universities, but something about teaching behind prison walls for Lee College was different – and better – than anything else.

“Lee is by far the best teaching experience I’ve ever had in my life,” Vann said. “Students want to be there, work hard and value the fact that that education is the only way for them to have something when they walk out of prison besides the orange sack of everything they’ve accumulated inside.”

Teaching history is particularly special, given how important it is that neither societies nor students repeat past mistakes. The inmates especially tend to like the concept of Texas History, and Vann stays motivated by the fun that comes from working with students committed to their education.

“I’m constantly surprised by my students,” Vann said. “Inside the prison, college students are the cream of the crop. It’s a very big deal for them to give up a lot of the prison mentality and prison conflict to be here. I know when I go in, I have a class that’s eager to learn.”
If there’s one thing that Charles Elliott learned from the hardscrabble upbringing that saw him drop out of school in the 11th grade and catch a 10-year sentence in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice at only 18, it’s that there is no such thing as failure when you come from nothing. Success results from simply refusing to give up.

Now the owner of top-ranked Elite Comfort Home & Commercial Services in Humble, Elliott floated through his youth with no direction and no idea what he was going to do, or how he was going to do it. Little changed after his first adult arrest ended with significant prison time and he adapted to a scary and strange new world behind bars – not until looked within and realized taking HVAC classes through the Lee College Huntsville Center would give him a skill he would need to be successful on the outside.

“I made up my mind: if I ever came back to prison, they might never let me out. I just wanted to go home, get a job and earn a living,” said Elliott, a husband and father of one who was released in 2008 and started Elite Comfort in a Chevy Camaro with no air conditioning, searching for clients to service.

“The people going to school, you could see it in them,” he said. “I was in class with a lot of people who were trying to change their lives. We all came from the same space. It put pressure on me; there was a standard to meet. It was learning to work, learning to study, learning to open my mind, learning to meet a deadline. Now the phone rings and I didn’t have to look for anyone.”

Chris Averitt, co-owner of Elite Comfort and vice president of Sales and Operations, knows that sense of achievement firsthand and played a central role in helping Elliott travel his path to success. A graduate of the Lee College Huntsville Center with associate degrees in HVAC and business administration, Averitt had developed his business plan and secured a job at an air conditioning company before being released from the Hightower Unit after serving 8 years of a 15-year sentence – determined to make a decent living and stay out of trouble.

His moment of revelation came when he learned he originally faced death or 99 years for his crimes and knew he did not want to repeat the mistakes that had defined his youth. When he
heard from a mutual friend that Elliott was out of prison and eking out a meager existence in San Antonio, Averitt offered to hire Elliott at his own successful HVAC business in Houston and provided him the on-the-job training he needed to earn a state license and advance his career.

“I took a criminology course at Lee College that enabled me to understand my situation and gave me the ability to think logically and get out of it,” said Averitt, a husband and father of two. The more I learned, the more I realized that I didn’t know. It became a passion.

“I was where I was because of decisions I made, but I didn’t have to be limited by my intellectual capacity. My mind enlightened and I delved in as deep as I could. I also had a huge desire to help someone who had been in my situation. Success is directly proportional to our desire and willingness to work for it.”

By the time Elliott had built up Elite Comfort and could see a bright future ahead, Averitt had sold his own company and explored other business ventures. When Elliott approached him with the idea of a 50-50 partnership, he was happy to come aboard. Today, the company employs 17 and has a fleet of trucks wrapped in the company’s signature pink and orange colors – and both men credit the Lee College Huntsville Center with equipping and empowering them to transform their lives and futures for the better.

“I wouldn’t be here today without that program,” Elliott said. “I would have been the exact same person I was when I went in. It wasn’t a gift; I had to work and I had a hard time getting hired, but there is no shortcut. You just have to keep going.”

“But society doesn’t owe ex-offenders anything,” Averitt added. “In fact, ex-offenders owe society quite a bit. We need to prove to ourselves and the people around us that we deserve a second chance and that we can capitalize on it. Without the opportunity for education, I would have been stuck.”
COLLEGE BEHIND THE RAZOR WIRE

Lee College was there in the beginning and has stayed the course

by John Britt with Dale Adams
It is difficult for me to believe that it was fifty years ago, the summer of 1966, when Lee College Dean Walter Rundell called me into his office to discuss a new program the college was initiating in the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC). He then asked me if I would like to teach an American history class there in the fall.

I was, needless to say, stunned. Teach history in a prison! To convicts! I was a young teacher with only two years’ tenure at Lee College and still on probation. I knew what Dean Rundell was saying: I was going to teach in the prison in the fall. When I told my wife, she was not particularly happy. She was convinced I would be murdered and reminded me that I was responsible for two small children. My father, an executive with a natural gas transmission company, was even less impressed. “Boy,” he said, and I knew I was in trouble when Dad called me Boy. “I did not help you go to college so you could teach criminals.”

That fall, five of us drove to Huntsville on a Saturday. Dale Adams, who taught English, would teach at Goree, at that time the women’s unit. I, along with Don Perry, whose discipline was math, was assigned to Ferguson, the unit for young first offenders. Phil Digham, English, and math teacher Bob Seale would teach at Ellis, a unit for hard-core recidivists. Sadly, Digham and Perry are no longer with us. However, before we were to be dropped off at our respective units, we were to go to the Walls Unit in Huntsville where we were to meet with the legendary director of the Texas Department of Corrections, Dr. George Beto, and Lee College Dean Walter Rundell, two men who believed in the redemptive power of education. Despite the bureaucratic world in which we live, there was no formal contact between Lee College and the Texas Department of Corrections. That would come a few years later.

After a short visit with Dr. Beto, the warden, and Langley, we left for our assigned units. We would drop Adams off first at Goree, which is south of Huntsville. It can, therefore, be accurately said that Adams taught the very first class in the program. Seale then took Perry and me to Ferguson as he and Digham proceeded to the Ellis unit. We would repeat this scenario every Saturday of the fall semester.

Entering the prison, Perry and I were ushered into the warden’s office for a brief orientation. An inmate then escorted us to the education wing where we met with the unit’s director of educational and recreational services. Following another brief meeting, I was taken to my classroom, introduced, and then left alone with some 24 young men in prison white. As I somewhat nervously explained the course, I have no doubt that my voice cracked. Little did I realize that I was beginning a 20 year journey that would deliver some of the most rewarding and exciting experiences of my teaching career.

Over the next two decades I drove, as did others, once and sometimes twice a week to the Huntsville area prisons: Ferguson, the Walls, Ellis I, Eastham (the unit that Newsweek magazine in an October 6, 1986, cover story referred to as “America’s toughest prison”), as well as south to the Sugarland unit. I taught not only American history but Texas history, world history, geography, and on one occasion Marriage and the Family (a sociology course). When I told Rundell that I had not had college courses in marriage and the family, he merely said, “You are married aren’t you?” Case closed.

The program rapidly expanded. Soon, virtually the entire Lee College academic faculty were making the drive once a week to units in the Huntsville area or to Sugarland. We took pride in the fact that Dean Rundell hired a cadre of talented and devoted faculty and we truly believed that we were, because of Dean Rundell, a unique group of...
From the beginning, we insisted that our offender students meet the same standards as our students on campus. Our offender students were indeed an eclectic group and a few were guilty of committing every felony imaginable. However, the majority were non-violent offenders who would eventually be released. We never inquired as to the cause of their incarceration and afforded them the same respect we did our students on campus. I remember one elderly inmate who teared up when I addressed him as “Sir,” as the guards often referred to him as “You ole thang.” In addition, we expected them to meet the same academic standards as our Baytown students. We insisted that there be no guards in the classroom as we feared that might inhibit discussion. In my 20-year tenure in the prisons, I can recall only two, maybe three, minor discipline incidences where I asked a couple of students to quit talking or leave the classroom.

I became acquainted with some of the most interesting and fascinating individuals I have ever had the pleasure of knowing, notably Sonny Evans. Sonny was the head building tender at the infamous Eastham unit. Building tenders, also referred to as Turnkeys, were inmates who, in reality, ran the interior of the prisons until the practice was prohibited by the lawsuit Ruiz v. Estelle. I would not call Sonny by name except that he is no longer with us; he died of a stroke while still incarcerated. Sonny either took or audited every course I taught. He was a hulking, massive presence with a face that belied his rough life, and he always sat at the front of the class. I truly believe that after a few semesters he could have taught American history as well as I.

When the Carrasco hostage situation erupted at the Walls Unit in the summer of 1974, resulting in the death of two prison employees, I was—and if this is not ironic—I don’t understand the meaning of the word—sequestered as a juror in the only criminal trial I have ever served on. I had heard rumors of the incident, and knowing that we had instructors teaching there that summer, I convinced the judge to let me call home to see if any of our people were involved. I was told that Lee College teachers were not among the hostages and that two of my former inmate students had called my house to see if I was all right!

After twenty years, the Lee College Board of Regents decided the program would be soon got over this as we came to realize that the Huntsville faculty was not only well credentialed but were extremely competent and talented teachers who were devoted to their offender students. The program continued to expand, offering not only a transferable academic curriculum but technical/vocational courses such as horticulture, culinary arts, truck driving, cabinet making, air conditioning, auto mechanics and data processing, permitting released offenders to immediately obtain gainful employment.

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Several years ago the legislature drastically cut funding for prison education, resulting in a severe reduction of the Lee College program and forcing a number of faculty members to accept an early retirement. However, because of the visionary leadership of Huntsville Dean Donna Zuniga, the program has not only successfully rebounded but, in fact, has grown. Currently Lee College offers academic and technical/vocational courses at six TDCJ units and will shortly expand to three more.

As a result of the dedication and hard work of Dean Zuniga and her staff at Lee College’s Huntsville Center, a delivery system of transformative education has evolved that produces inmates who earn associate’s degrees and, when released, go on to become productive citizens, often obtaining a bachelor’s and on occasion advanced graduate degrees. Most importantly, however, they seldom return to prison, thus saving the state considerable amounts of money.

When the Rand Corporation (a research organization that develops solutions to public policy issues) released their 2013 study on recidivism rates, their data revealed that offenders who completed two years of college have a 10% recidivism rate, compared to 60% for those offenders receiving no additional education while incarcerated. The re-incarceration rate for those with a four-year degree dropped to 5.6%. It costs Texas taxpayers $18,265 to keep a person incarcerated in what one wag called “the largest hotel chain in Texas.” As a consequence, re-incarcerating 290 released offenders would cost Texas taxpayers $5.29 million a year. Additionally, the cost is considerably more if an inmate has health issues, and many do. National data reporting, as reflected by the Rand Corporation, tells us that 65% of inmates released without job skill training or some form of education will return to prison. That is an indisputable fact.

And, that is the point. We know that participation in the college program has a profound impact on reducing recidivism. The data supports this assertion. We trust others will take heed and continue to support college behind the razor wire.
The proud legacy now enjoyed by Lee College’s Huntsville Center was initially envisioned in 1966 by then Lee College President, Dean Rundell and the Director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Dr. George Beto. Their goal was to offer academic courses and vocational programs within the Texas prison system. Dean Rundell believed there was “tremendous potential for the rehabilitation of TDCJ offenders to a degree and in a manner that would enable them to survive and progress in the free world upon release!”

The Huntsville Center currently provides academic and technical programs to student offenders at six TDCJ units. Training and education in Lee College’s in-demand occupations lead opportunities for students to earn industry certifications, become licensed by the state, and graduate with a fully accredited Associate of Applied Science degree from one of seven technical areas.