Restoring GROWTH
horticulture program grows plants for habitat restoration
President’s Corner
Dr. Dennis Brown, president, Lee College

OUR Belief in Second Chances

There are times when second chances do make a difference. Case in point—Lee College’s Offender Education Program in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice prison units. By the numbers, if an offender is released from prison with no-to-little education beyond what they had when they were initially incarcerated, 50 percent of those paroled will return to prison. In contrast, for offenders who earn a certificate or associate degree in a technical field of study that number drops to below 10 percent. The choice is simple: would you rather pay to house, feed and guard an offender, or assist those incarcerated who are serving time to learn a skill that will lead to a job, financial self-sufficiency, and re-integration into society as a productive law-abiding tax-paying citizen?

Lee College has provided instruction to offenders since the 1960s. We just celebrated our 50th year educating future productive citizens and employees. Each semester, over 1,100 offenders are receiving training in one of the following career pathways: Cabinetmaking; Culinary Arts; Horticulture; Truck Driving; Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning; Welding; Business; and Microcomputer Applications. Offender students must be within five years of parole eligibility to apply to enroll in the programs. To remain in the programs, they must have good behavior and be making satisfactory academic progress toward their certificate or degree. The State of Texas provides a loan program for offenders to pay the course tuition. With all the clamor about the high student loan amounts and default rates for non-incarcerated students, incarcerated student loan default is mostly non-existent. There is a simple reason: a condition of an offender’s parole is the requirement that the loaned funds must be paid back. Failure to pay back the loan would be a violation of parole and cause the parolee to return to prison.

On June 23, 2018, Lee College held its graduation ceremony at the Wynne Unit in Huntsville, where 167 students received their Associate of Applied Science Degrees. As impressive as the ceremony and awarding of degrees was, more impressive were the smiles, excitement and cheers from children, parents, spouses and other family members in attendance. For some families, this was the first time in a long time that they had something to be proud of about their graduate. It clearly is a life changer. The ceremony is held in the chapel, which is behind razor-sharp barbed wire and guards. However, if you were present and did not know you were in a prison unit, you would have thought you were at any one of the thousands of graduation ceremonies that occur each year throughout the country. Caps and gowns were the order of the day. As proud as the families were of the offenders, the offender students were beaming. For some of them it was the first “right” thing that they had done in some time.

Lee College’s dean of the Huntsville Center is Donna Zuniga, who has been involved with prison education for Lee College for over 30 years. Her exemplary leadership is complemented by a talented support team which includes Paul Allen, academic division chair; Scooter Langley, technical division chair, and a cadre of skilled faculty who go behind the bars every day to change lives. Equally amazing is the support from businesses throughout the state, especially in the Houston area, who donate funds to help pay tuition costs. Why? They are investing in their future workforce. Once the offender is released on parole, these companies hire them. It is an amazing return on investment.

None of this would be possible without the support of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Special thanks to Bryan Collier, executive director; Oscar Mendoza, deputy executive director; Rene Hinojosa, director of the rehabilitation services division; and the unit wardens, without whose support inmate education programs would not exist.

So yes, second chances do work. One offender at a time.
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Inmate debaters triumph over free world colleges in competitions behind bars

With the support of Senior Warden James Jones and Assistant Warden Matt Dobbins, the Lee College debaters had trained as often as they could within the confines of their strict prison schedule—even facing off against coaches Adam Key and Jeremy Coffman, champion debaters themselves with nearly a dozen national titles between them. Yet despite beating Texas A&M University in the first George Beto Invitational at The Walls, the inmate debaters went into the second Beto debate in 2017 with the Great Debaters of Wiley College feeling just as much the underdogs.

The judges’ ultimate 4-1 decision in favor of Lee College—which argued against the resolution that “online education detracts from the college experience”—said something else: they may be locked behind bars without access to the myriad academic and cultural resources of the free world, but these inmate debaters should not be underestimated.

To ensure an even playing field for competition, neither Lee College nor Wiley 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.

Craig Caudill and David Mains, who debated on behalf of the Huntsville Center team, built their argument around several key points: the college experience is subjective and means something different to every student; online education can contribute to the college experience by helping students become more independent and responsible; online education can make the college experience more accessible to more people; and online education can be a valuable supplement to the traditional on-campus experience.
“It’s overwhelming; you never know how a debate is going to go,” said Caudill, who debated on behalf of the Huntsville Center team for the second year in a row. “We were a little nervous because we’re outside of our normal routine, and the topic was outside of our wheelhouse. But we went with what we had, used our passion and our heart, and with the help of our coaches we got the win.”

Unlike last year when they had only six weeks to get ready for the debate against the Aggies, the Lee College debaters had a full year to practice their debate skills, polish their deliveries and embrace the lessons learned from their victory the first time around. Senior Warden James Jones also agreed to allow the debaters to spend Friday and Saturday evenings in preparation for the invitational against Wiley—and national champion coaches Adam Key and Jeremy Coffman joined them as often as possible to serve as their opponents and offer more seasoned competition.

“Debate has gone from being an extracurricular activity to something they actually build their lives around,” said Key, who pursued Wiley College for the team’s next opponent given the institution’s pioneering history in debate.

A small historically black college, Wiley earned international recognition when its debaters participated in the first interracial debates in history and won the national championship against the all-white team from the University of Southern California in 1935. Their story was chronicled in the 2007 film, “The Great Debaters,” starring and directed by Denzel Washington.

“These guys are good enough that I could take them to any tournament in the world, but I can’t because of who they are,” Key said of the inmate debaters, likening their experience to those of Wiley debaters who were routinely denied the opportunity to compete because of their race. “In eight years of coaching, I’ve never been as proud of any group as I am about this one. Win or lose, that will never change.”

Though they lost, both debaters from Wiley College said the experience of participating in the George Beto Invitational behind bars would stay with them for life. Senior Andre Earls counted the debate against the Huntsville Center team among the highlights of his seven years of competition.

“This event is a representation of the power of speech and debate,” Earls said. “It means so much to me because that’s what debate is supposed to be: accessible to everyone. I’m cherishing the moment and I feel good for having been a part of it.”
Huntsville Center hosts first-ever TEDx event at a Texas prison

With the backing of Senior Warden James Jones and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the Lee College Huntsville Center made history by hosting the first-ever TEDx event inside a Texas prison – bringing scholars, professionals and even one of their own into the Huntsville Walls Unit to challenge and inspire student-offenders.

The TEDx program gives independent organizers the opportunity to hold their own TED Conference for a local audience. The incredibly popular TED conferences have been held all over the world each year since 1990. They focus on the three broad subject areas of technology, entertainment and design and center on celebrating “ideas worth spreading” from noteworthy and interesting speakers. Videos of these “TED Talks” have drawn millions of views online.

Six guests took to the chapel stage at the Huntsville prison to share their thoughts and insights with a packed house of inmates enrolled in Lee College programs. The speakers—including incarcerated student David M.—covered topics ranging from managing a healthy media diet to the importance of teaching debate behind bars, the power of rescuing homeless dogs, finding the strength to push past a cancer diagnosis, and harnessing enough motivation to put your life back together after a tragedy. 
Center works to bring digital technology inside prison walls

For all that faculty and staff do to ensure 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. For example, computers, the Internet and other digital experiences the outside world relies on every day that are scarcely available to inmates.

To help prepare students to enter the modern era by enhancing their computer and information literacy, Lee College used a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Texas State Library and Archives Commission to purchase the eGranary Digital Library. An offline information store, also known as “The Internet in a Box,” it gives Huntsville Center students access to millions of multimedia documents within a closed, secure local area network. The digital library comes with a built-in proxy and search engine that mimics the Internet experience, along with an internal security system that monitors what students do and view. 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.

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Additional grant funding has also allowed the Huntsville Center to purchase and install interactive digital smart boards in the education areas at several units that respond to touch controls and allow instructors to more seamlessly incorporate computer technology into their lessons. Plans are now underway to bring JSTOR—the digital library of academic journals, books and primary sources used by scholars, researchers and students around the world—inside prison walls, too.
E mbracing his wife and his mother after receiving his Associate of Applied Science degree from the Lee College Huntsville Center, Quincy Moore Sr.—a horticulture major who earned cum laude honors and had completed 16 years behind bars—struggled to describe how meaningful it was to be one of more than 180 graduates honored at the commencement ceremony inside the chapel of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Wynne Unit prison.

The Class of 2017 was the largest in the 51-year history of the Huntsville Center, one of the biggest and oldest correctional education programs in the United States. The Center offers associate degrees and certificate programs in technical and academic fields to a growing enrollment across six TDCJ units.

President Dr. Dennis Brown praised the Huntsville graduates—dressed for their ceremony in traditional black robes and mortarboards over their white prison-issue uniforms—for pursuing education and taking steps to become employed and productive citizens upon release. The curriculum is just as challenging and rigorous inside the prison as at the main campus, he said, and recidivism data shows that offenders who receive education while in prison are significantly less likely to return. Before the graduates were called to the front of the chapel to receive their degrees, commencement speaker Terrell Blount—himself a former offender now working for the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City—reminded them that the key to getting over the inevitable bumps in the road is by being resilient and focused on the greater goal: leaving prison walls and never coming back. Completing a Lee College education is a way to truly prepare for that eventual release, he said, rather than biding time.
Employers partnership helps students build new lives

With unemployment down to levels not seen in decades and reduced immigration squeezing the supply of workers, businesses are looking beyond traditional workforce sources—and one large Texas homebuilder services company is looking squarely at the Lee College Huntsville program as a source of workers.

Wisenbaker Builder Services provides specialty services to homebuilders across the state, creating cabinets, countertops, flooring and window coverings.

This kind of detailed work requires craftsmen who have been well trained and have hands-on experience—the kind of craftsmen who graduate from Lee College’s cabinetmaking program.

Company executives have visited classes inside the Ferguson prison unit to meet students who are nearing graduation and parole eligibility. They have also shared their insights with students about what employers will be looking for.
James Babineaux, director of talent management for Wisenbaker, said the company has turned to ex-offenders as potential labor for both business and social responsibility reasons.

"From a business standpoint we are simply trying to throw a wider net in sourcing labor and sourcing subcontract labor. We have made the conscious decision to explore both traditional and non-traditional channels."

Company owner John Wisenbaker Jr. got interested in ex-offenders as potential workers through an acquaintance in Florida who is in a similar business and has established contacts with prison ministry groups.

To get the ball rolling, they turned to Wisenbaker VP of Operations Lena Gibson, who already had a strong interest in prison ministry outside of her professional life.

Paul Calfee, who works with the program for Wisenbaker, said, "Prior to [Gibson's] retirement, John let her pioneer what this would look like for Wisenbaker Builder Services. She really combed the Texas market and built a lot of relationships and contacts."

"The thing that’s been so encouraging with Lee College is you guys have had a very receptive ear to ask ‘What are your needs? We can develop courses and classes to help more strategically prepare these men and women in our programs to be more of a perfect fit.’"

Calfee said the cabinet-making and woodworking programs were immediately good fits for their needs. "We learned very quickly that the HVAC and the mechanical program was a shoe-in."

Looking down the road, Calfee said, "We’re in constant communication with some guys at Lee College because they want to develop more of a tile-focus in one of their programs."

Calfee said that with the potential tile program, as with woodworking, the company not only looks to hire graduates, but also helps out the program by providing expertise and donations of material to use in training.

Calfee said there was no resistance within the company to working more with ex-offenders, but at first there were a lot of questions. They have now adopted the program as one of their strategic initiatives and regularly report to senior management.

Babineaux said the owners of the company are very faith-based and very vigilant about giving back.

"This is simply an extension of their personal desire to reach out and help people. It’s a mix of a business decision and also comes from the heart of the owners," he said.
From Prison to success: Wrestler speaks from experience

Hassan Hamin Assad, known to the wrestling world as Montel Vontavious Porter or MVP, staged his greatest comeback before he set foot into the ring. He achieved that comeback through education while he was in a Florida prison—and he shared the story with graduates of the Lee College Huntsville Program at the Spring 2018 Commencement Ceremony.

“When people ask me ‘Did you go to school?’ I say, ‘Yes, I did. I went to Florida State—but not the university.’

Assad went to prison at the age of 16 and served more than eight years. “I took correspondence courses,” he told graduates, “because in Florida at that time they didn’t have something as awesome as the college courses that Lee College offers you.”

“At one point, I was you,” he told the students. “There was a point in time when I wore a uniform and I had a prison number and I had no idea what the future held for me. All I had was hope and the pen to write the next chapter of my life.”

He said a correctional officer introduced him to wrestling and he found he had a talent for it, so he devoted himself to developing that talent.

Assad cautioned that achievement in the outside world would not come easily.

“People are going to tell you ‘you suck’ because you’re an ex-convict, but you’ve got to show them differently. Show by example. You have to be better than everyone else,” he said.

“This is America and everybody gets a shot, but you guys are starting about 10 feet back from the starting line, so you’re going to have to push a little bit harder. You’re going to have to make some sacrifices.”

“What is this cap and gown going to lead to,” he asked the graduates. “Figure out what you want to do and do it. Don’t let anybody stop you from being what you want to be.”
“Figure out what you want to do and do it. Don’t let anybody stop you from being what you want to be.”
Lee College Huntsville Program contributes to Habitat for Humanity home

When Habitat for Humanity of Baytown dedicated its newest home in April, a special contribution by students of the Lee College Huntsville program was part of residence.

Lee College was a pioneer in providing college education for prison inmates and continues to operate a successful program at several units in and around Huntsville. In one of those, the Ferguson Unit, the college offers classes in cabinetmaking.

“The students were excited about building the kitchen cabinets since they knew the cabinets were for a Habitat house,” said Jason Turner, cabinetmaking instructor.

“Sandy Denson and several of the Habitat volunteers visited the Lee College Cabinetmaking Class to speak with the class of 18 offender students about the need the organization had for the Habitat houses.”

Denson, who is resource development director for Habitat for Humanity of Baytown, said the work saved more than half the cost of cabinets for this home, with Habitat for Humanity only having to pay for materials.

“The visit had a great impact on the students since they were able to take part in the project from the beginning. The students really appreciated Sandy and the rest of the group taking the time to come and see them and the Cabinet Making program that is offered through the Lee College Prison Program at the Ferguson Unit,” Turner said.

“Since part of what Lee College emphasizes to the offenders that are on the road to rehabilitation is to give back to the communities, this project really hit the mark for the students.”

Habitat for Humanity of Baytown is an independent unit of Habitat for Humanity, which builds homes for people with limited incomes. Much of the labor and materials is donated.

The family receiving the home is required, before the home is completed, to contribute a set number of hours of “sweat equity” either in their future home or in another Habitat for Humanity house.

The family then is required to pay Habitat for Humanity back for the work and materials that it had to pay for. That “mortgage” is repaid without interest charges and is used to finance construction of additional homes.

Since its beginnings in 1990, Habitat for Humanity of Baytown has built 40 homes. Nationwide, the Habitat for Humanity organization is one of the largest homebuilders in the country, transforming the lives of not only residents, but also volunteers and contributors.
Students prepare to meet the outside world

It's early summer and graduation is days away. The students beam proudly as visitors come to admire their work at an open house. Each one knows that he must be able to sell himself as well as his skills when he soon enters a competitive job market.

And each one knows that he'll take with him to the interview a felony criminal record that will keep a lot of doors firmly closed.

There were a lot of surreal elements in visiting a Lee College cabinet-making class inside the Ferguson Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections near Huntsville—beginning with the concept of an “open house” inside a prison unit.

"I'd never have dreamed that taking a college course in prison would be something like this."

But for the men who were about to receive an associate degree from the Lee College program, there were also a lot of similarities to any other group of graduates: pride of achievement, nervousness about upcoming interviews and, most important, hope.

Jason Freeman wasn’t new to construction trades; he had worked 15 years as a plumber before going to prison.

"I would never have thought I’d be in college," he said. He had been happy to attain a high school diploma, then learned of the opportunity to enter the college program.

"I’d never have dreamed that taking a college course in prison would be something like this," Freeman said.

The program opened his eyes to far more than just how to build cabinets for high-end custom homes.

The curriculum includes education in safety, business, budgeting and even interview skills. One project is to build a portfolio recording the student's education, including designing a business logo and creating a budget of how to start as a cabinet-maker with a budget of $5,000 for tools and supplies.

Students also learn to use computer-aided drafting to design cabinet-making.

Another student pointed out the class’s full-size model kitchen, complete with appliances and finished cabinets. The first project for each new class is to tear it out. Then, they learn how to build a new one.

Not all of the tools the students learn to use are those that plug in. Much of the course’s benefit comes from learning life skills that weren’t mastered outside the prison walls.

Joshua Blackstone has spent his whole adult life in prison, entering at the age of 17 and being an inmate for 25 years.

"When I started the class, I didn’t even know how to use a tape measure," Blackstone said. “I never used a tool in my life.”

Now, he has his associate of applied science in cabinet-making as well as degrees in liberal arts and business, and a certificate in Microsoft applications. He has been a teaching assistant for three years.

"It's giving us a productive way to make a living and helps us with communicating and how to get along with people," James Mulieri said.

While most of the visitors to the open house were staff of the prison system or Lee College, another guest was Rudy Mendiola, a graduate of the program who now works as a general contractor doing residential and commercial building construction.

"This cabinet-making class can really give an ex-offender an edge and an advantage in re-entering society," he said. “It provided a way for me to build a strong work ethic and bring a positive attitude to the work.”
For much of the Houston area, the water that flows into homes from municipal water supplies comes from Lake Livingston, the second largest lake entirely within the borders of Texas. Lee College plays a unique role in keeping that water healthy and flowing.

Since 2013, Lake Livingston Friends of Reservoirs has restored habitat for fish and wildlife populations, improve fishing and water quality, and reduce erosion by regularly planting vegetation in non-bulkhead areas to inhibit silt flow and provide a shelter for small fish and fingerlings to restore the fishery of the lake.

The group has planted 10,100 American Water-willows at 18 sites, mostly in the southern portions of Lake Livingston. Those plants have their roots in the horticulture program Lee College operates at the Ellis Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Students started by propagating cuttings from parent plants in trays and grow cells, then hardened them off outside until they reached 6-8 inches in height and could be placed in water to flourish. Many said the opportunity to help restore Lake Livingston has been a life-changing experience that has made them feel honored to give back to the community and environment, help both humans and animals and play a role in affecting positive change despite their incarceration.

Lee College Huntsville Center Dean Donna Zuniga said, “It is always a positive message to showcase the incarcerated students giving back to the communities.

“Keep in mind, all the propagation, planting and growing of the willow plants is occurring in our horticulture classes at Ellis.”

Texan by Nature, an Austin-based nonprofit recently designated the Lake Livingston Friends of Reservoirs efforts as a “Conservation Wrangler.”

In doing so, the group noted that most of the project’s research and development is now done by Lee College Instructor Scooter Langley and the inmate horticulture students at
The Story of the Lee College Offender Education Program

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The Story of the Lee College Offender Education Program

Lee College Huntsville Center
Huntsville’s TDCJ Ellis Unit, who are exploring growth methods to produce larger, healthier plants in less time.

Founded by former First Lady Laura Bush, Texan by Nature’s mission is to spur Texan-led conservation that produces tangible benefits for people, prosperity, and natural resources by activating new investments in conservation. According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Survey, Texas anglers spend over $1.5 billion annually in pursuit of their sport.

Zuniga said that on May 4, 2018, instructor Langley and several other Huntsville Center faculty members were among the group of volunteers planting willows at the lake.

Tina Buford, Texan by Nature’s board president, said, “This innovative conservation project combines broad-based community engagement in collaboration with state agencies to help improve water quality, restore recreational fishing, and provide economic benefit to the region.”

While the Lee College Huntsville Center horticulture students can’t attend the plantings in person, they have already planted and nurtured the trees that will lead to cleaner water and a healthier ecosystem.

“It is always a positive message to showcase the incarcerated students giving back to the communities.”
The proud legacy now enjoyed by Lee College’s Huntsville Center was initially envisioned in 1966 by then Lee College Dean Walter 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 seven TDCJ units. Training and education in Lee College’s in-demand occupations in turn 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.