College behind the razor wire
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“Let’s Keep a Good Thing Going”

Donna Zuniga, Dean, Lee College Huntsville Center

It’s been 46 years since Lee College stepped inside the razor wire to help change the lives of Texas prison offenders. We came with a mission, and we came to stay.

From 175 students in 1967, the program grew to more than 900 in academic and technical classes before legislative cuts began to make their mark — and close the door.

Despite massive cuts, the light has not gone completely out. As Dean of Lee College’s Huntsville Center, I supervise a staff of 15 full-time academic and technical faculty, 15 part-time academic faculty, two academic and technical employees, and an operating budget of more than $1.5 million.

It’s money well spent. Commencement ceremonies inside the walls in April 2011 awarded 86 associate degrees and 454 technical certificates. Many of these graduates will transfer their credits to other college programs upon release. The truth be told, only 10 percent of offenders with a college degree will return to prison a second time, a far cry from the 60 percent that return from offenders that do not have a degree. And graduates will have opportunities for jobs — and be in much better position to turn their lives around after release.

It’s easy to see why we believe in this program, and why we believe its benefits to individual lives, communities and the state are worth the investment. Educating offenders and changing their direction in life is far less expensive than incarcerating them.

So with evidence readily available that education works, why do offender education programs like this one face the budgetary axe year after year? During the last session, legislators cut funds for inmate education by 42 percent; when federal funds are included, the total loss comes to more than 70 percent.

The current state budget allocation of $1,363,883 for academic and vocational training under Goal C of the 2011/2012 Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) comprehensive budget continues to make additional cuts rather than restore previous budget cuts and thus reverse the trend. As a result, some contracting colleges have been forced to scale back and even eliminate academic and technical programs at many of the TDCJ units. If this trend is not reversed soon, offender recidivism rates could easily begin to increase at a greater cost to taxpayers.

Lee College, for one, is working hard to offset lost state and federal dollars with private dollars. Recently, we launched the Britt/Hodgin Second Chance Scholarship to raise funds for tuition assistance to offender students. And, we are proactively telling our story to legislative and community leaders — and anyone who will listen.

Much of that good story you will find in these pages, the inaugural issue of Second Chance magazine. You will read about the lives we change, the passion we feel, the needs we encounter.

As you discover the value of offender education, help us spread the word — so we can keep the door open and the light burning brightly for those who need education most.
IT’S A FACT:
Education Changes Lives

Your gift to the Britt/Hodgin Scholarship Fund can make a difference in a life, in a community. Can you help?

THIS YEAR, MORE THAN 800 TDJC OFFENDERS IN HUNTSVILLE WILL BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE LIFE-CHANGING BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

500 will apply to Lee College. Only 200 will receive needed financial assistance that can make their college education possible — and change the course of their future.

You can make the difference. It is a proven fact that the recidivism rate for offenders with a college education is only 10 percent — far lower than the 60 percent return to prison rate for parolees without an education.

Lee College was one of the first institutions of higher learning to offer college credit classes to offenders in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 1967 and is considered one of the largest and most successful college educational programs in the country.

The Huntsville Center currently offers student offenders at four TDCJ units and one private unit course work leading to the completion of an Associate of Applied Science degree. These programs help students to prepare for gainful employment and personal success once released from TDJC.

YOUR ONE-TIME CONTRIBUTION CAN HELP A TEXAS OFFENDER EMERGE FROM PRISON WITH A REAL CHANCE FOR SUCCESS. A partnership with TDJC keeps tuition costs low.

PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER — THANKS TO THE BRITT/HODGIN SECOND CHANCE SCHOLARSHIP.

The Britt/Hodgin Second Chance Scholarship provides educational opportunities for offender students who attend the Lee College Huntsville Center. The scholarship recognizes outstanding individuals who are widely credited with much of the early success of the Huntsville Center and its significant contribution to the reduction of offender recidivism in the state of Texas.

John Britt was among the first Lee College instructors to teach behind the razor wire in Huntsville, and often cites his experience as one of the most rewarding challenges in his illustrious teaching career. As the Technical Dean of Lee College, Johnette Hodgin provided invaluable administrative support to the Huntsville Center and was a staunch advocate of state funding for prison education programs.

Funds are managed by the Lee College Foundation and will be used to help students in the Offender Education Program pursue their education.

Contributions may be made online at www.lee.edu/foundation. For additional information about the Britt/Hodgins Scholarship, please contact:

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$190 enrolls one offender in a college program
$700 buys an entire semester
LESSONS FROM THE INSIDE

LARRY DOUGLAS
Established in 1968, the Gateway Foundation's Correctional Program provides substance abuse counseling services in 21 correctional treatment programs nationwide.

Best-known for its Therapeutic Community (TC) Treatment Model, the Foundation seeks to prepare offenders to successfully re-enter society with an increased opportunity for healthy, pro-social living and a decreased likelihood of recidivism. Services offered through the program include: In-Custody Correctional Treatment Services, Jail-Based Services, Community Re-Entry/Transitioning Programs, and Outpatient Care. On average, more than 5,500 men and women participate in the Foundation's treatment services each day.

Gateway currently provides in-custody treatment services for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice at two In-Prison Therapeutic Communities (IPTC), three Special Needs Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities (SAFPF), and one Intermediate Sanction Facility (ISF). According to Foundation reports, 90 percent of Texas program participants released in 2011 were abstinent from alcohol and illegal substances 60-90 days post release; additionally 95 percent had not been re-arrested, and six out of every 10 completers had already gained verifiable employment in the community, during that same time period.

**About the Gateway Correctional Treatment Program**

“These men...can make a difference in society, if they will set themselves in the right direction.”

Larry Douglas held his head high as he walked toward the podium. More than 20 years ago he was another eager face in a graduating class of student offenders, and now he was about to deliver the 2012 commencement address. For Douglas, the speech marked the culmination of a personal journey that began in 1982 with a 25-year prison sentence.

“At the time I began my incarceration, I was a very troubled young man, caught up in a life of crime, drugs and alcohol," Douglas reflected. "I was plagued by failed relationships and I had a very narrow perspective on life."

His prison sentence, he says, would soon change that.

“The first day I entered the penitentiary, I was interviewed by the warden. He suggested I make the most of my sentence by getting a college education. Until that moment, the idea of going to school had never crossed my mind. But the more I thought about it, I figured it would be a good way to pass the time, so I signed up for Lee College's Offender Education Program.”

The Lee College Offender Education Program was established in 1966 in partnership with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, and today provides more than 700 student offenders with educational coursework leading to an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree. An AAS degree is the first two years of a four-year baccalaureate degree.

For Larry, however, it provided much more. Soon after enrolling, he says, he found himself immersed in reading, writing and analysis. He sobered up, and in the process, discovered a passion for counseling.

“Lee College showed me there was a bigger world out there, one that didn’t involve crime or drugs,” he said. “More importantly, the program taught me to believe in myself. I learned that if I applied myself, I could change my life.”

To say Larry changed his life is an understatement.

After earning associate’s degree from Lee College, he transferred to Sam Houston State University where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology. Later he attended the University of Houston-Clear Lake and received a master’s degree in Behavioral Science-Psychology. *

In 1992, he joined the Gateway Foundation as a substance abuse counselor working at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Jester I Substance Abuse Felony Punishment (SAFP) facility in Richmond. In 2003, he was promoted to his current position as assistant director of programs. Today, he not only provides Houston-area inmates with assistance including substance abuse and career counseling, but also travels the country training other counselors on how to work with offenders with addictions and medical needs. His greatest reward, he says, is getting to share his story with inmates about to leave prison to begin a new life.

“So many of these men have tremendous potential. They can make a difference in society, if they will set themselves in the right direction,” he said. “I want my story to give them hope. If I can shake the past, they can, too.”

* Costs associated with advanced degrees are incurred by student offenders, and are not covered by the state.
It was 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 year’s 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, “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 Dignam, English, and math teacher Bob Seale would teach at Ellis, a unit for hard-core recidivists.

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, as well as Alonzo Langley, TDC Director of Educational Services, and the warden.

To say the least, the beginning was not particularly auspicious. Bob Seale was driving, and in Huntsville he accidentally made a wrong turn onto a one-way street. The police officer who wrote Seale a ticket was not impressed with the story of our mission and our plea that we were unfamiliar with Huntsville. Dr. Beto seemed mildly amused when we told him about the incident. There is a wonderful photo of the five of us in the Warden’s office at the Walls, with the warden, Dr. Beto, and Alonzo Langley. I often joke that we look like a group of Baptist preachers: short haircuts, no facial hair (I now sport a beard), dark suits, and narrow black ties.

After a short visit with Dr. Beto, the warden, and Langley, we left for our respective assignments. We dropped Adams off at Goree. Seale then took Perry and me to Ferguson as he and Dignam proceeded to Ellis. 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 20 years of the most rewarding and exciting experiences of my teaching career.

Over the next two decades I drove once, 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 Sugarland. Not only taught American history, but Texas history, world history, geography, and on one occasion marriage and the family, a sociology course.

The program rapidly expanded and shortly over 30 Lee College teachers were making the drive to units in the Huntsville area or to Sugarland.
From the beginning, we insisted that our inmate students meet the same standards as our free world students. Our students were an eclectic group and consisted of every felon imaginable. We treated them with the same respect as we treated our students on campus and expected to be treated with respect as well. 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. There was Sonny Evans, the head Building Tender at Eastham. Building Tenders were inmates who, in reality, ran the interior of the prisons until the practice was overturned by the lawsuit of Ruiz v. Estelle.* I would not call Henry by name except that he is no longer with us; he died of a stroke while still in prison. Sonny either took or audited every course I taught. He was a great big ugly dude who 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.

After a few years, we began to witness the positive fruits of our labors: inmates who received their associate’s degrees and, when released, became productive citizens, often obtaining a bachelor’s and on occasion advanced graduate degrees.

I recall one young man, who became my friend, who had an unenviable record of armed robbery convictions. Somehow he made parole, finished his degree at Lee College, transferred to a university and earned a master’s. Married with two now-grown children, he is currently an executive with a well-known Texas company. He is only one example of a multitude of similar success stories.

When the Carrasco hostage situation erupted at the Walls Unit in the summer of 1974, 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. I 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!

In the meantime, I suggested to my father that he accompany me to visit one of my American history classes at Eastham. Dad, still skeptical of my prison assignment, somewhat reluctantly agreed. This was in the summer; the classes were four hours long and there was no air conditioning. From the start my dad was impressed with the respectful demeanor of my inmate students and their apparent enthusiasm and desire to learn under less-than-ideal circumstances. During the breaks, he visited with some of the students, and by the time we left the unit late that afternoon, he was a convert. Dad was active in the Baytown Chamber of Commerce and subsequently gave a speech to the Chamber endorsing the importance of the college experience in a prison and its role in reducing recidivism.

And that is the point. We are aware that participation in the college program has a profound impact on reducing recidivism and have the statistics to support this claim. We trust that others will take heed and continue to support college behind the razor wire.
One of the newest efforts at correctional education in Texas draws its inspiration from an unlikely source: the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola.

For 15 years, that prison has been home to an innovative program that educates offenders as ministers through a Bachelor of Biblical Studies program administered by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The program has been credited with a major cultural change within the maximum security prison.

Texas senators John Whitmire and Dan Patrick (a Democrat and a Republican), visited the prison before supporting a similar program in Texas. “I’ve never seen so many people serving a life sentence with a smile on their face,” Whitmire said. Violence at the facility has plummeted.

In 2011, the first 40 Texas offenders entered a similar program housed at the maximum security Darrington unit in Rosharon, southwest of Houston. The Texas program is administered by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Fort Worth-based institution with a Houston campus. It receives no public funds for its operation, but is supported by private donations.

Dr. Ben Phillips is director of the program. His assistant, Lee College alumnus Brandon Warren, is the only other full-time staff member. Other faculty, Phillips said, are shared with the Houston campus or employed part-time.

Phillips said the program differs from other education programs in a significant way beyond its religious connections and private funding: It is geared toward educating long-term offenders rather than those about to be released.

Where most offender education programs require participants to be nearing release, applicants to the BBS
“We’ve seen guys who have started trying to take responsibility for their culture.”

any unit in the prison system (any male unit, since Darrington is a male prison), and are transferred to Darrington if accepted.

Phillips said the plan is to return them to other units after graduation, to serve as mentors to other offenders.

Even early in the program, he sees the results beginning. “One of the things we see happening is that they are looking for ways to be in ministry to the guys around them,” he said. One group of students has started a Bible study that has already reached over 200 offenders.

“We’ve seen guys who have started trying to take responsibility for their culture,” he said. He described the prison culture as “corrosive,” taking a toll on both offenders and staff.

While Phillips works for a Christian seminary and holds a distinctly religious perspective, he understands the state will judge the program on purely secular standards. The mission of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, he said, is not just to keep people safe by keeping criminals segregated from the rest of society, but also to rehabilitate.

“This kind of thing fits their institutional mission if moral rehabilitation is accomplished,” he said.

If Southwestern’s program has results similar to what Louisiana has seen at Angola, Phillips said the benefits will be measurable—with payoffs ranging from reduced property damage to the prison itself to reduced costs from a safer operating environment—with corresponding savings in medical care for injured inmates and staff.

If the program and its graduates can help reduce the corrosiveness of the prison environment, he added, TDCJ may further benefit from reduced employee turnover.

For an offender to enroll in the BBS program, he must have a GED and have academic test results proving he can work at a level of at least an eleventh grade education. He must also have a good disciplinary record, and recommendations from prison staff confirming a willingness to be of service to other prisoners.

Phillips said the school asks the prison system not to pass on information related to the applicants’ race or religion until after a student is accepted. Since the program has a Christian focus, Phillips said, most applicants are Christian. However, even in the first two classes accepted (about 80 people), the students already include students who are Muslim and Jewish, as well as “some [religions] I’ve never heard of,” he said.

As with other programs, a major part of the BBS program is simply introducing offenders to a new way of looking at life. “A significant and easily overlooked part of any educational program within the prison,” Phillips said, is that it is “designed to connect people to reality.”

“It’s about the truth.”
For most released offenders, returning to prison represents failure. For Brandon Warren, it represents success.

Warren, an alumnus of the Lee College Offender Education Program, has returned to prison not as an inmate, but as a central player in a new program that has high ambitions for turning lives around through faith-based higher education. He serves as administrative assistant for the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Biblical Studies Program at the Darrington prison unit in Rosharon, southwest of Houston.

Like most people in the system, Warren entered prison without a high school diploma.

After attaining his GED from the Windham School
District, he enrolled in the Lee College program to work toward an Associate of Arts in Humanities degree at the Hightower prison unit. (That degree program has since been eliminated due to budget cuts.)

“I actually think I got 128 hours,” he said—nearly double the requirement for an associate degree. “But because of my time—I only had an eight-year sentence and was up for parole in the fourth year—I wasn’t going to be eligible for a bachelor’s program, so I just stayed there and took everything. I took air conditioning and refrigeration, construction carpentry, the horticulture class; I was only three classes shy of getting the Associate of Arts in business administration. I got as much as I could while I was there.”

While he accomplished a lot in a short time, Warren acknowledged he didn’t take advantage of the educational offerings right away. “That was my third time being incarcerated,” he said. “I did 13 months in juvenile, six months in state jail, and then I got that eight-year sentence.

“I was 19, and I just decided I didn’t want to be involved in gangs anymore, or that lifestyle. I wanted to be an educated man.

“The school was there and readily available. It was a blessing from God that I landed there as opposed to a unit where college courses were not offered.”

Despite a rough start, Warren took to education. After getting out of prison, he pursued and earned a Bachelor of Biblical Counseling degree from the College of Biblical Studies in Houston. After that, he enrolled in the Master of Divinity program with Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary at the Houston campus of the Fort Worth-based institution.

He credits the prison education program for his shift in direction. “It changed my world view,” he said. “It changed the way I understood the world and my role—in it.”

There was a practical effect, he said, since being in class all the time insulated him from the violence of the day room, but that was not the real impact. “The intellectual effect was that I began to see my role in the world completely differently.

“When I started, my personal goal was to become an ‘expert’ in all of the fields of psychology, sociology and philosophy; that’s how naive I was. I thought such a thing was possible for a human being.

“When I started school I quickly saw that I didn’t really know anything. That’s why I got the degree in humanities.

I saw that ideas were very similar in different religions, and philosophy and psychology are talking about issues of free will and determinism.”

That radical change in perspective was something Warren saw in other students as well.

“There were students who were in the college, but were still involved in gangs. These began to see their involvement differently. They began having condescending attitudes to the thought patterns of their friends and the reasons for doing the kind of things they did.”

At the time, there were also classes in criminology and juvenile delinquency. “They began thinking about what they were involved in completely differently,” he said.

He said he sees the same transformation in the students in the Biblical Studies program. “It expands people’s thought processes, which can be quite humbling. Humility begins to change people’s relationships.”

Warren has, in a sense, been part of the prison Biblical Studies program since before there was a program.

When he started at Southwestern, he said, he told administrators his desire was to someday return to prison to teach what he was learning in his theological studies.

Three months later, he said, he received an email from the dean telling him that the seminary was exploring the feasibility of starting a program within the prison system. In 2011, as the program started, Warren was on board—working to see that others have the same life-changing experience he did.
Dr. Michael Gary got into prison education almost by accident, but 30 years into it, he’s still enthusiastic. Gary actually retired last year when Lee College was forced by budget cuts to eliminate most of its full-time faculty teaching academic courses. He immediately took a part-time job teaching the same courses he had before.

In 1982, Gary was teaching at Sam Houston State University while completing his PhD work. To help make ends meet, he took a part-time job teaching science for Lee College inside the prison. “Once I got in the system and discovered what kind of students I had, it became long-term at that point.”

Not long after starting to teach, Gary said, he realized that prisoners weren’t what he had seen in the movies. “These folks are just ordinary people—there, but for the grace of God, go I.”

“Most of them don’t have a high school education when they get into prison,” he explained. “They get their GED while they’re there, and then those that are enterprising decide to go to college.”

One success story Gary tells is of a former offender who now holds a responsible management job in the
private sector near where he served time. “He came into prison with a third-grade education, got his GED, and started going to Lee College. He got his associate degree, enrolled at Sam Houston State and got his bachelor’s degree, then transferred to the Ramsey unit where he got most of his master’s degree before he was released.”

Comparing his time teaching in prison to his time teaching outside, Gary said, “I like it better than teaching in the free world. When my guys come to class, they sit there. They don’t eat lunch and throw things on the floor or cause a disruption. They generally don’t chit-chat among the class.”

“They’ll do what you ask them to do,” he said, even under harsh prison conditions. Since Texas prisons are not air conditioned, cell temperatures can easily remain over 100 degrees even at night in the summer. Crowding is a fact of life, and privacy is nonexistent. Even so, “if I ask them to read five chapters, they read five chapters. If I ask them to write a long essay exam, they write a long essay exam,” he said. “You’ve got to admire them for giving it a shot. They work hard.”

“Education in prison works,” Gary said. “If you get your associate degree, the recidivism rate’s about 10 percent—90 percent stay out, 10 percent come back. With no higher education, the recidivism rate’s about 60 percent—you stand a better than 50-50 chance of coming back to prison.”

The prisoners who make the effort to take classes are those who are ripe for change. “They want to do better—that’s why they’re in our classes. They’re tired of the life that they’ve led—they want to be productive citizens.”

For those offenders who persevere to get an associate degree, Gary sees graduation day as a turning point in their life—for many, the turning point that will mean they won’t be returning to prison.

“When graduation comes, they go in there with a black cap and gown on,” he said. For people forced to wear all white all the time, the color change is a powerful sign that they are, for this day, “no longer inmates, or convicts, or offenders or whatever the current buzzword is—they’re graduates. They look like a graduate.”

Gary said he usually begins his classes reminding students that what got them where they are is a history of failure. “They failed to complete high school; they failed to have good relationships with their teachers, their peers and whatever else; they failed to obey the laws of the state of Texas. They got caught and didn’t have enough money for a high-powered lawyer to get them off so here they sit. So, your deck’s already stacked against you. You have that attitude, ‘I’m going to fail,’ so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“But when they go to college — when they take that first college class and pass — that’s a success,” he said. “So they take another, and another, and they pass those, too. Sometimes they don’t pass, but they’re persistent and they take it again.”

“Every class that they take is a success, and it begins to build an attitude in them that ‘I can do it!’ Even if they have to take a class over, they have the attitude, ‘I can make it.’

When students complete a degree, Gary always urges them to take part in the graduation ceremony, even though it’s not required. “That will validate what you’ve done more than anything I can think of,” he said. The graduating offenders are allowed to have family members attend their graduation.

“When they leave,” Gary said, “they have that attitude, ‘I’m going to make it.’ So, when they go out and try those first job interviews and they don’t work out, they’re going to keep at it.”

That attitude, he said, can make the difference between continuing to look for work, and looking for the familiar comfort of old friends and old behaviors. “They have now got an attitude of success, as opposed to an attitude of failure.”

Paul Allen, instructor and administrator at the Lee College Huntsville Center, congratulates longtime professor Dr. Michael Gary upon receiving the center’s Excellence in Teaching Award for 2011-2012.
Texas Senator John Whitmire, who chairs the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, believes that education is essential to a criminal justice program that is “both tough and smart.”

Whitmire, a Democrat, represents much of north Harris County, including the north part of Baytown. While the main Lee College Campus is out of his district, much of the college’s coverage area is in it.

In recent sunset review hearings on the prison system, Whitmire has suggested the role of community colleges in prisoner education should be maintained, possibly even expanded.

He is quick to say his support of correctional education is not soft on crime. “I started in ’93 [on the criminal justice committee], and there were plenty of folks, including me, that were tough on crime. But all you’ve got to do is drill down on it and you realize that being tough alone is not going to work—you’ve got to be tough and smart.”

“We release about 7,000 people a year out of prison,” he said. “Most inmates will be released at one time or another, and it’s just common sense that if you release a better person than the one you got, it will enhance public safety and save money.”

Whitmire said the correlation between educational achievement and incarceration is clear. “The average offender,” he said, “functions on about a six-and-a-half grade level. Large numbers suffer from learning challenges such as dyslexia, attention deficit—it’s largely a poorly educated group of individuals, with most of them being school dropouts.”

“Education, in my judgment, would be a key component to any rehabilitation plan,” Whitmire said.

He acknowledges that education is not the only answer. “Equally important is drug and alcohol treatment and mental health services.”

“I really do believe the public’s been way ahead of us on this for a long time,” Whitmire said. “The public is smarter than a lot of politicians give them credit for being. Drug and alcohol [treatment], with some education, makes a better person.

“If you’re going to punish them, which we’ve decided to do, while you’ve got them locked up, you ought to be rehabilitating them to make them a better person, so you don’t have future crime victims, and these people can start paying taxes instead of being a burden,” he continued.

“What’s tougher on someone,” Whitmire asked, “than making him get off drugs, get off alcohol, get an education and turn his life around?”

Whitmire was quick to add, though, that his rehabilitation emphasis is for the majority of offenders who are in prison for drug-related or low-level property crimes. For more serious criminals, such as murderers, rapists and child molesters, “we lock them up and throw away the key, and do a pretty darn good job of it,” he said.

Another reason Whitmire supports education programs in prison is money.

“What’s more fiscally conservative than fixing somebody’s problem where you don’t have to support them for the rest of their life?” he asked. “It’s very expensive to incarcerate people.”

Whitmire sees community colleges as a vital part of prison education.

“They do a great job of education people in the free world,” he said, “There’s no reason why they shouldn’t do more inside the prison.”
WHAT WOULD I HAVE DONE IN MY LIFE TO BE RECOGNIZED?

I am the first of my parents’ kids to go to college and, after this semester, will be a college graduate. To some, it may not be much, but for my family, it says a lot. My sister never graduated high school, my brother just went and got his G.E.D., and it took me coming to prison to go to college.

Of all of the things I have done, coming to prison and going to college is my most recognized attribute. I have completed Wyndham Schools Electrical Vocation Trade, Lee College Electronic and Telecommunications Vocation Trade, and will graduate with an Associate’s of Applied Sciences degree at the end of the summer semester 2012.

Being the one and only child to graduate from college is a great accomplishment in my family, and I believe I will be remembered and recognized for this.

Sincerely,
John Bloise

YOUR INSTRUCTION HAS CHANGED MY LIFE FOREVER

If I saw you in the free world you would recognize me by my confidence that I have obtained while attending Lee College/Huntsville. I have learned so much and achieved an attitude of self-worth that I otherwise wouldn’t have known even existed.

Your teaching and that of the other instructors in the Lee College faculty has changed my life forever. I will be forever in your debt.

My intentions upon release are to find work and invest in Lee College students. I hope to contribute not only money but some time to help build the class offerings of Lee College/Huntsville Center. I am really looking forward to helping in any way I can.

Sincerely,
Joseph W. Anderson

WHEN I BECOME SUCCESSFUL, I WILL SEND OTHERS LIKE ME TO COLLEGE

Someday you will see advertisements promoting my pool and construction business. When you do, please know that my success started the day I enrolled in Lee College.

I base my success on three principles learned in your class and those of other Lee College instructors. Success is what you make of it. No one is going to give you anything. If you want to be successful, one must think success.

It is my sincere intent that when I become successful I will be sending others like me to college under the Two Make a Difference Fund. Knowing that you have made a difference is to be part of the “Cream of the Crop”.

Thank you for your knowledge shared.

Sincerely,
Charles R. Hamilton

COLLEGE PROVIDES AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE

Though prison is inherently stressful, myriad opportunities exist for achieving enduring success. College, for one, provides me with a broad, yet effective approach to not only gaining knowledge in various subjects, but also teaches me how to learn, collaborate, create teams, and receive constructive criticism!

I am constantly amazed and saddened at how many of the incarcerated do not participate in educational opportunities provided, yet stand in line every week and throw away family resources for chips and sodas. I’ve spent years abandoning success—no more!

Sincerely,
Von Michael Short

Mailbag

A forum for students, alumni, family and friends of the Lee College Offender Education Program. Address e-mail correspondence to Paul Allen, pallen@lee.edu.

IF YOU SAW ME IN THE FREE WORLD

If you saw me in the free world, you probably wouldn’t recognize me. Number one: I wouldn’t be wearing white. I’d be either in a suit, or in my business attire that would consist of my uniform with my company logo for Arctic Air.

Number two: I’d be extremely busy, but not too busy for the very person that had inspired me for sixteen years to start my own business and be what I never thought I could be.

Number three: I’d be the one that is giving back. I’d be the one starting scholarships so others would be able to do what I did; and that is to make it in a world where many don’t want to see ex-cons make it. I’d be showing them that it can be done. Don’t feel bad for not recognizing me, though, because I don’t think my own family would recognize me. However, if you can recognize success, I’ll be easy to spot. I’ll be the one dripping with cream!

Sincerely,
Von Michael Short

WHAT WOULD I HAVE DONE IN MY LIFE TO BE RECOGNIZED?

I am the first of my parents’ kids to go to college and, after this semester, will be a college graduate. To some, it may not be much, but for my family, it says a lot. My sister never graduated high school, my brother just went and got his G.E.D., and it took me coming to prison to go to college.

Of all of the things I have done, coming to prison and going to college is my most recognized attribute. I have completed Wyndham Schools Electrical Vocation Trade, Lee College Electronic and Telecommunications Vocation Trade, and will graduate with an Associate’s of Applied Sciences degree at the end of the summer semester 2012.

Being the one and only child to graduate from college is a great accomplishment in my family, and I believe I will be remembered and recognized for this.

Sincerely,
John Bloise
KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT PRISON EDUCATION IN TEXAS

Lee College was one of the first institutions of higher learning to offer college credit classes to offenders in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 1967. Today the program is one of the largest and most successful correctional educational programs in the country. The Huntsville Center currently offers student offenders at five TDJC units course work leading to the opportunity to earn industry certification, state licensing and a fully accredited Associate of Applied Science degree in seven technical areas.

OFFENDER INFORMATION
Facts suggest that a larger percentage of minorities are in lock up partly due to their low socioeconomic status and ineffective legal representation.

- Approximate percentage of Texas’ overall population that is non-white: 40
- Approximate percentage of Texas’ prison population that is non-white: 70
- Rate at which blacks are incarcerated compared to whites in Texas: 7:1
- Number of Texas black men added to prison population vs. the college student population (1980-2000): 4:1
- Estimated portion of black children in Texas with at least one parent in prison on any given night: 1 in 14

WHY PRISON EDUCATION PAYS
Facts suggest that an investment in postsecondary academic and technical education programs save taxpayers money and reduces recidivism.

- The 82nd legislative session cut state appropriations for postsecondary education funding by 41.5 percent
- Offenders completing two years of college reflected a 10-percent recidivism rate
- The average recidivism rates in Texas are 49 percent (re-arrest) and 25 percent (re-incarceration).
- The increase in Texas corrections spending between 1980 and 2004 was 1,600 percent

GOALS OF CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION
- Reduction in offender recidivism
- Reduction in cost of offender confinement
- Increased success of former offenders
- Improved employment opportunities
- Promotion of an incentive for positive behavior

WHAT STUDENTS SAY
“Lee College has provided me the opportunity to be successful in life. I now have real choices.”

“Thanks to Lee College and my associate degree, I now have a chance to be a productive member of society.”

“Lee College literally gave me a new life with great promise to be the kind of person I’ve always wanted to be.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
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