

**Barriers to Postsecondary Career Technical Education in Correctional Education:
Removing Educational Assessment Scores as Entrance Criteria. *Real-World Project*
Submitted by Richard Crosby 12/23/2022**

Introduction

Building the movement to make higher education accessible to incarcerated individuals was the theme at the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison in 2018 (Benson, 2022). Equity in correctional education is a broad frontier in the postsecondary education landscape that is full of growth and opportunity because of the lack of study of incarcerated people as a marginalized, under-served population (Olaghere et al., 2021). However, the current literature sustains the notion that disparities still exist within the justice system in the United States regarding incarcerated people of color and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, populations who have also been historically discriminated against in postsecondary institutions. (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020). This group of people are often overlooked as a segment of the population who pose a risk to society and are written off because they are being punished for crimes they have committed. The result of this perspective is that prison college education is viewed as a commodity, which under-values its benefits (Benson, 2022).

Still, not all crimes are equal, nor are the punishments. Ninety-seven percent of offenders will be released and re-integrated into society and are expected to become productive members of the community (Hurley, 2021). The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) releases approximately 76,000 offenders annually (Bronson & Carson, 2019). A correctional facility should offer the opportunity for inmates to correct their behavior without barriers to programs, particularly in Career Technical Education (CTE), that serve to achieve the goal of correctional education. Society expects education and training to address the needs of the community, including the need to address offending behavior (Johnston, 2021). Many advocates of access to higher education in prison consider it a civil right that can promote informed citizenship rather than serve as correctional intervention for criminal behavior (Benson, 2022). How can the problem of educational assessment (EA) scores impeding access to postsecondary CTE programs in prison be solved at Trinity Valley Community College (TVCC)? Removing the EA score as an entrance criterion to postsecondary CTE education may be one of the first steps in increasing educational equity for incarcerated individuals.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this study was to provide recommendations to solve the problem of EA scores from the Texas Adult Basic Education (TABE) test interfering with access to postsecondary correctional education workforce programs at TVCC. “Incarcerated individuals are an important segment of our society that could benefit from greater academic attention to educational equity” (Olaghere et al., 2021, p. 233). The problem was that the Adult Basic Education requirements limited all offenders’ access to postsecondary education options while incarcerated. Postsecondary credentials create access to social and economic mobility; nevertheless, not many students have been able to enroll in, afford and complete college (Taylor et al., 2021). Higher education in prison has the potential to fundamentally affect society and reduce inequity based on the disproportionate incarceration of people of color and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020). Reforms benefit under-served students but do little to suppress “traditional disparities by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status in

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outcomes such as introductory college-level (or gateway) course completion and credential attainment. For placement reform to be both effective and equitable, it is best coupled with additional related reforms, including improvements to curriculum, instruction, and student supports” (Kopko et al., 2022, p. 1).

Inmates who have a high school diploma or GED upon entering the TDCJ and desire to enroll in a postsecondary education workforce program will be affected by this project. Currently the TDCJ has 163,000 inmates spanning 99 correctional facilities (TDCJ, 2022). The proposed project will affect approximately 5,000 inmates in the Region II district of the TDCJ in four maximum security prisons in the TVCC district. TVCC is a public, open-enrollment two-year college in rural east Texas that offers 18 vocational programs for incarcerated students. According to the associate vice president of corrections education at TVCC, the school enrolled approximately 750 inmates in 2021 continually through the year as opposed to 2,763 in 2011.

The purpose of offering postsecondary programs in the TDCJ is to give inmates an opportunity for rehabilitation by developing their mental skills and providing marketable job training skills so they can re-enter society as successful, productive citizens. Rehabilitating these individuals through educational programs while incarcerating them is a primary function and responsibility of prisons so that inmates leave better prepared to contribute to and flourish in their communities (Davis & Linton, 2021). Career and technical training also address the TDCJ’s need for qualified inmate workers within its system throughout the state. Throughout its history, correctional education has been evaluated. The results show that incarcerated individuals participating in prison higher education change and are less likely to re-offend, reducing recidivism. Benson (2022) suggests that based on this evidence, change is both possible and desirable.

The desired challenge to address is granting access to postsecondary CTE programs for inmates who have verifiable credentials for entering college, without regard to mandatory EA testing scores. EA scores are meant to address placement into Adult Basic Education courses at the secondary education level. All inmates in Texas are required to take the EA regardless of whether they have a GED/high school diploma or college transcript, and they are required to take it within their first week of incarceration as they are being processed into the system. During this time, inmates are the least focused on future educational opportunities, particularly when they have long sentences, not fully comprehending how the results could affect their future educational endeavors — even if they are already qualified for college entrance. Additionally, this placement system could be misaligned with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s (THECB) goals for educating Texans by limiting access to postsecondary CTE certificates and degrees. According to the THECB website, the *60x30TX* plan is a state priority and sets the goal that “by 2030, at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-64 will have a certificate or degree” (THECB, 2022, p. 5). Furthermore, traditional test-only systems across the country are being re-examined and are being replaced with alternative placement strategies to decrease the number of students being placed in prerequisite developmental education and “increase access to college-level courses” (Kopko et al., 2022, p. 1). A problem with test-based models is that they

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are not measures of how successful a student will be in an environment working with hands-on skills (Del Carmen Unda & Lizárraga-Dueñas, 2021).

Currently, depending on the offender's EA score, they are allowed to take only certain college vocations. This limitation may prevent them from taking a course that they desire to take, slow the process for their enrollment, or send them to the end of a statewide waitlist that decreases their chances of being able to complete the class before paroling or discharging from the system. For example, in Iowa, 71 percent of offenders enter the Department of Corrections with a high school diploma but have short sentences, which creates challenges with the enrollment and completion of vocational programs, especially when treatment programs take precedence over education (Dewey et al., 2020). It would behoove the Rehabilitation Programs Division of the TDCJ to have this barrier removed so that all inmates are qualified the same way as "regular" students for the opportunity to participate in postsecondary CTE courses. Organizations need to analyze what policies are contributing to the problem of incarceration rather than adding policies to solve the existing issue.

Background (history of the inequitable practice and the population being examined)

Racial disparities are a characteristic of mass incarceration that have existed for an extensive time in the United States (Taylor et al., 2021). Understanding the history of higher education in prisons from purpose to design is critical to effectively make advancements in increasing equity in correctional education (Benson, 2022). This history begins more than 200 years ago with American prisons offering religious instruction as well as academic and vocational programs (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020). According to Johnston (2021), in the late 1700s, prison reformers expressed concerns about what was being taught in prisons and by whom. The notion was that prison was a school of crime, where inmates would learn new bad habits from, or at the least have their bad habits reinforced by, more experienced inmates who were worse than themselves and had been sitting idle in these houses of correction. Henry Fielding proposed a question by asking to imagine these individuals emerge from these facilities less "idle and disorderly than they went in?" (Johnston, 2021).

Prison reforms in the late 19th century and early 20th century included adding chaplains and schoolmasters as instructors of math, reading, and writing (Johnston, 2021). In October 1969, the Windham School District (WSD) "was established by the Texas Board of Corrections as authorized by the Texas Legislature, to provide educational opportunities to students incarcerated in state prisons" (Windham School District, 2022). The same year TVCC began offering prison education under the direction of the WSD. Ten years later, "the state of Texas implemented a statewide testing program that changes periodically to comply with state/federal mandates and rulemaking from the state's primary oversight agency, the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Since its inception, the Texas statewide testing system has steadily grown in size, scope, and rigor" (Del Carmen Unda & Lizárraga-Dueñas, 2021). The policy being examined is Texas Department of Criminal Justice-Texas Education Agency (TDCJ-TEA) Memorandum of Understanding; 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 89.23 (West 1997); Tex. Gov't Code Ann. § 508.183 (West 1997); Texas Code Of Criminal Procedures § Article 15.27; and Texas Education Code Section 25.001 (Prison Policy, 2022). This policy is a TDCJ policy and a TEA policy, the latter of which regulates public primary and secondary education but not postsecondary education. College courses, curriculum and other regulations fall under the jurisdiction of the THECB.

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Although college is not mentioned in this policy, vocational classes remain bound to it through the Rehabilitation Programs Division of the TDCJ.

Traditional testing systems dictate that short tests in math, reading and writing indicate college-ready academic preparedness. After testing, many students are considered to “require substantial, not-for-credit, prerequisite remediation through developmental coursework” prior to enrolling in most entry-level college courses including CTE (Kopko et al., 2022). Most correctional agencies, particularly in Texas, have additional requirements for participation in in-prison college programs. Those other factors include time of release, disciplinary records, custody/security levels, and the main crime for which they are incarcerated (Davis & Linton, 2021). A more recent development in creating access to higher education for students lacking high school transcripts is states and colleges accepting student-reported high school grade point average data, which is more accessible and cheaper to obtain than official transcripts (Kopko et al., 2022). Inmates who participate in prison higher education programs are approximately 6 percent to 7 percent more likely to recidivate than inmates who do not participate in postsecondary education programs in prison (Davis & Linton, 2021).

Method of the Evaluation

This study is qualitative. Offenders were not questioned or surveyed due to the laws that govern outside workers’ interaction with inmates through the TDCJ. Documents from the Rehabilitation Programs Division Post-Secondary Education Programs Employee Manual were used to assess current policies. Also, publications from the TDCJ including the Offender Orientation Handbook, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2022-2030 strategic plan, a presentation from the associate vice president of corrections education at TVCC, the Prison Policy Initiative, and the Bureau of Justice Statistics were used for data collecting.

Summary of Findings

Each year, all incoming inmates arrive at one of the intake facilities of the TDCJ; are processed; are issued a 148-page Offender Orientation Handbook; and within the first week of a long-term prison sentence, usually within days, are given the TABE test. All inmates are required to take this test upon arrival at the TDCJ. The test dictates their placement in education, regardless of whether the offender has a diploma, a GED or neither credential. Although this information is presented in the handbook, what is the likelihood of a new inmate reading the book and understanding the information on their first day of incarceration in a state penitentiary? How many potential students are prioritizing education over trying to understand their living arrangements away from their loved ones for the next number of years?

In 2016, 77,385 inmates were admitted into state and federal prisons in Texas, and 76,733 inmates were released (Bronson & Carson, 2019). Annually, TVCC averages 750 students in four prison units, including the two largest facilities in Texas (Hurley, 2021). This number is disproportionately low even considering the nine other institutions that offer postsecondary education courses in the TDCJ. For all offenders who are eligible to enroll, the TDCJ pays the initial cost of two courses per academic semester, which is to be reimbursed by the student when they parole. Therefore, cost is not a factor in regard to accessibility. These figures indicate that

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the potential number of students that could be obtaining postsecondary credentials is not being maximized.

Removing the EA score is only one barrier to postsecondary CTE access in prison and does not guarantee success to those who would obtain access by removal of that criterion. Inmates still must avoid disciplinary action and are not allowed to receive major cases while being supervised. Attendance policies are complicated by the regular disruptions that occur in a prison environment and issues with correctional officers and staff who are not committed to the educational process for convicts.

Postsecondary programs are provided through contracts with 10 colleges and universities serving the geographic areas where units are located. Inmates wishing to participate in these postsecondary programs must meet the criteria for admission to each college or university. The TDCJ has criteria that must also be met, and inmates must receive security and classification clearance before entry into the programs. Security is the number one priority in all prisons and supersedes any other program that may be offered within the facility. Regardless of the level of academic success that potential students have or have had in their past that qualify them for postsecondary education courses, inmates are segregated based on their criminal history, social history and institutional history before their educational history is considered. Once the inmates have been interviewed, they are classified and grouped within the facility according to their line class. This grouping also affects their eligibility and what jobs that they can obtain while incarcerated. However, their line class can change based on their behavior while in TDCJ custody. They can earn an opportunity to take educational courses based on their behavior. TVCC and the TDCJ in conjunction will allow only line classes S2 (trusty), G1, G2 and G3 (with special permission from the warden) to enroll in postsecondary education courses. For safety reasons, G4 and G5 classifications cannot take courses based on their crime, length of time or disciplinary record.

Furthermore, TDCJ students can enroll in only one college vocation if they are not within five years of being released. Priority is given to those with the least amount of time to serve. With a revolving door of more than 70,000 inmates per year, offenders who are eligible for postsecondary CTE enrollment may be getting stuck at the back of the line for entrance into courses. The line is longer if they must retake the TABE because they did not take it seriously when they were first corralled into the system. Therefore, this choice should not hinge on a process that is irrelevant to higher education placement. The line then becomes longer if they qualified for only certain vocations because of a low EA score, even though they are qualified for college because they entered the system already having a GED or high school diploma. Removing this policy will give all pre-qualified inmates the opportunity to enroll in a program that they would not be forced to take because of a low EA score; they could choose one that they would be motivated to work in upon re-integration into society.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to provide recommendations to solve the problem of TABE scores interfering with access to postsecondary correctional education vocational programs at TVCC. The central research question for this study was how to solve the problem of EA scores impeding access to postsecondary CTE programs in prison at TVCC. Based on the history of the

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inequitable practice and the population being examined, three possible solutions are recommended to answer the central research question. The three recommendations are:

1. Remove the EA score as a criterion for postsecondary CTE unless the participating college wants to use it as a criterion. Carceral students should have the same entrance criteria as free-world students to enroll in college programs. One exception to this policy would be for immigrant and international students who have no prior secondary school records from the United States (Kopko et al., 2022).

2. If an EA score must be used, move the testing date beyond the intake process so that potential students have time to read through the Offender Orientation Handbook and become aware of the educational possibilities and consequences based on the outcome of the exam.

“The Every Student Succeeds Act outlines that states must involve multiple up-to-date measures of student academic achievement, including measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding, which may include measures of student academic growth and may particularly be delivered in the form of portfolios projects or extended performance tasks (1177-25). However, the state of Texas does not currently employ this approach. Instead, the TEA continues to test students using single measure, standardized, high stakes testing programs despite the clear recommendations outlined by scholars and advocates rooted in significant concerns about the inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and inequity of the current testing system” (Del Carmen Unda & Lizárraga-Dueñas, 2021).

3. Create a professional learning committee of educators and prison officials to help all stakeholders commit to making education accessible to inmates for the benefit of everyone. Helping stakeholders understand that the college program is aligned with the overall mission statement and rehabilitative and educational priorities of the agency will aid in the success of the students (Davis & Linton, 2021). Historically, colleges and prisons “have not coordinated at the same level within states,” but having a set of mutually shared goals, regular communication and shared resources is important for the success of all, especially students (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020).

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