

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN TEXAS PRISONS

*A Collective Conversation &  
Networking*



**BRIEF**



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# 1. What is HEP?

For the purpose of this brief, we will be discussing Higher Education in Prison (HEP) in Texas as it relates to programs inside the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

As of August 31, 2023, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) reported 45,048 individuals released for fiscal year 2023.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these individuals return to local communities where they must be prepared for the challenges of the 21st-century workforce. Education is key to this transition. By 2030, 62% of all jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential.<sup>2</sup> Texans will need to earn a credential beyond a high school diploma to meaningfully participate in our state's economy, and the stakes are even higher for formerly incarcerated persons. Being able to find self-sustaining employment can mean the difference between successfully transitioning back into a community or returning to prison.

Post-secondary education typically refers to any education pursued after completing high school or obtaining a GED. While many individuals choose to pursue traditional college degrees, post-secondary education also includes non-degree courses. These courses can range from vocational training programs to certificate programs to professional development workshops.

The question of whether prison education programs should result in degrees or industry credentials is a matter of differing opinions. The goal is to ensure that coursework in prison can contribute to individuals' post-release efforts, thus furthering their education and advancing their careers.



1 Texas Department of Criminal Justice Statistical Report Fiscal Year 2023

2 The Commit Partnership, "Community Colleges are key to solving Texas' shortage of skilled workers" Texas Tribune, March 13, 2023 <https://www.texastribune.org/paid-post/community-colleges-are-key-to-solving-texas-shortage-of-skilled-worker/#:~:text=cp-,By%20The%20Commit%20Partnership,workforce%20to%20fill%20these%20jobs.>

## 2. A Brief National History of HEP

College in prison programming and federal funding are synonymous to many. This is due to the impact of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (the crime bill) on higher education in prison programs. In the early 1990s, an estimated 772 programs existed in 1,287 correctional facilities. With the crime bill's passage that number fell to just eight. Incarcerated individuals were no longer eligible for Federal Pell Grants.<sup>1</sup>

Federal Pell Grants have again been reinstated for incarcerated individuals as of July 2023. With this reinstatement comes the opportunity to provide quality post-secondary education to incarcerated Texans.

Currently, there is no statute governing how higher education in prison programs will be overseen and ensure they are of sufficient quality. Such a vital charge on behalf of Texans should be codified, leaving nothing to chance. If we are to make the most of the opportunity Federal Pell Grants allow, we must start the process of creating basic governance for these programs, codifying and improving existing practices, and establishing the data collection and sharing infrastructure we will need to identify and promote high equality programs.

We need to pass state legislation.



<sup>1</sup> Texas Appleseed, “*The Benefit of Higher Ed in TX Prisons Criminal Justice Project Issue Brief (February 2023)*” [https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/Issue%20Brief\\_Higher%20Ed%20in%20TDCJ%20Final%20\(2023\).pdf](https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/Issue%20Brief_Higher%20Ed%20in%20TDCJ%20Final%20(2023).pdf)

### 3. Student Centered

Incarcerated individuals are forever marked by their involvement with the criminal justice system. As such, every advantage is necessary to equip them to succeed in their transition back into society. Education is widely considered to be a crucial tool in transforming the mindset and behavior of individuals, particularly those who have been incarcerated.

Students must be the focal point when designing HEP programming because they are the ones who will ultimately benefit from it. By placing students at the center of the program, educators can tailor the curriculum to meet their unique needs and goals, ensuring that they receive the support and resources necessary to succeed. For example, prior to the commencement of the first class and the arrival of administrators at the facility to enroll students, arrangements must be made for credit transfers, degree advising, student support services, and pathway completion.



## 4. Why Do We Care?

By providing incarcerated individuals with the opportunity to earn a degree or certification, they are better equipped to secure stable employment upon release, thereby reducing the likelihood of returning to prison. This has a ripple effect on their families, as they are more likely to be able to provide financial stability and support for their loved ones. Furthermore, by empowering individuals to make positive changes in their lives, these programs have the potential to create safer and more prosperous communities for all.

One of the primary economic advantages of Texas HEP programming is the significant reduction in costs associated with incarceration. The average cost of housing an individual in a state prison can range from \$30,000 to \$60,000 per year, depending on the state and the level of security required. By providing education and vocational training to incarcerated individuals, Texas HEP programming can help reduce the likelihood of recidivism, which in turn reduces the number of individuals returning to prison. This in turn leads to significant cost savings for the state, as fewer individuals require costly housing and supervision in correctional facilities.



# 1. Texas State Initiatives and HEP

There are two Texas initiatives that intersect with higher education in prison: the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) Talent Strong Texas and TDCJ's 2030 Plan. Both initiatives emphasize the importance of collaboration between government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community stakeholders. They seek to create economic opportunities for all Texans, not only as a matter of social justice but also a sound economic decision for our state.

## A. Talent Strong Texas

THECB Talent Strong Texas was created by the THECB to enhance the workforce in Texas by offering education and training in key sectors. The program's goal is to prepare individuals with the essential skills and qualifications needed to meet the demands of employers in Texas, thus contributing to the state's economic growth.

## B. TDCJ's 2030 Plan

TDCJ's 2030 Plan is an initiative to reform the criminal justice system and assist released individuals in successfully reintegrating into society. Through targeted programs and services, the plan aims to equip individuals with the necessary resources to establish a stable and productive life. A significant aspect of the plan involves enhancing access to education and vocational training, enabling individuals to gain the essential skills and knowledge required for employment post-release. By providing marketable skills, the plan strives to lower recidivism rates and foster economic independence.



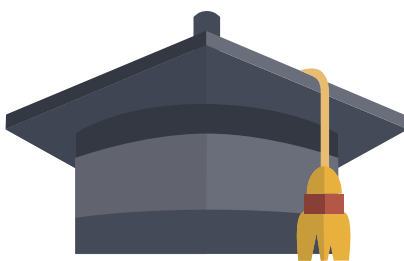
## 6. Texas HEP Statistics



# 129,653

Individuals were incarcerated in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) as of August 31, 2023.

**1,584**  
**Males**



**291**  
**Females**

Enrolled in post-secondary education as of April 5th, 2024

# 64,702

Individuals incarcerated in Texas could be eligible for Federal Pell Grants, estimated Vera Institute of Justice in 2016.



**2,829**  
**Males**



**289**  
**Females**

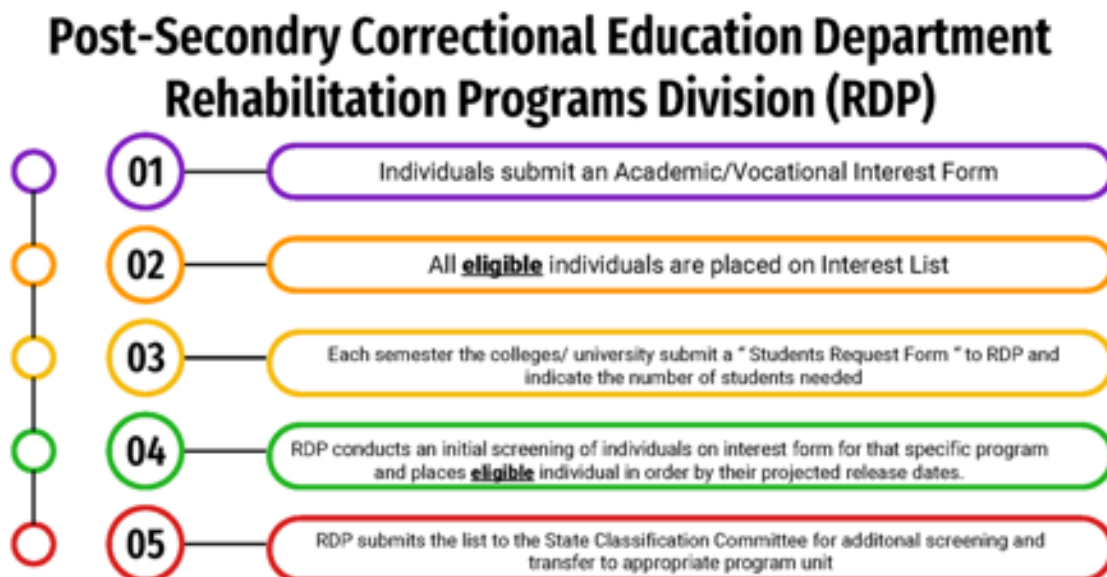
On the wait-list for college programming as of December 31st, 2023

## 7. Post-Secondary Education in TDCJ

The Rehabilitation Programs Division (RPD) functions as the central authority overseeing and managing activities associated with programs in TDCJ. The division encompasses a range of programs. Post-secondary education is one of many.

Individuals wishing to participate in these post-secondary programs must meet the criteria for admission of each college or university. TDCJ has criteria that must be met, and all individuals must receive security and classification clearance before entry into the programs.

The process to enroll is shown below:<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> "TDCJ Self-Evaluation Report Submitted to the Sunset Advisory Commission, August 31, 2023" <https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/2023-09/TDCJ%20SER.pdf>

## 8. TDCJ-Created Groups

In response to Federal Pell Requirements, TDCJ has created two groups of “relevant stakeholders” to provide guidance for the creation and implementation of HEP.

### A. PEP Advisory Board<sup>1</sup>

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) serves an important role in facilitating incarcerated students’ access to quality college and university programs and Pell Grants. Deemed the oversight entity by federal guidelines, TDCJ serves as the gatekeeper for quality colleges and post-secondary programs offered to incarcerated students at state facilities.

In accordance with federal guidelines, TDCJ utilizes a partnership with an advisory committee, the Texas Post-Secondary Education Program Advisory Committee, composed of mandatory and relevant stakeholders to determine that a PEP is operating in the best interest of students. This committee is composed of a student voice representative, a representative of two [groups that advocate for incarcerated students], one representative of the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, one representative of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, two representatives of the Texas Workforce Commission, one representative of the Texas Association of Community Colleges, and one representative of the Correctional Education Association.

The TDCJ is the oversight entity and manages the advisory committee. The committee reviews each college or university’s program proposal applications and either approves or denies them. TDCJ’s application is the first step in a three-step process to become eligible to administer Pell Grants under Title IV of the Higher Education Act (as amended in 2020). If approved, the school will be eligible to move to the second and third steps in the process (approval from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC] and then the U.S. Department of Education [ED]).

### B. Consortium<sup>2</sup>

The Texas Higher Education in Prison Consortium represents 13 community colleges and universities that presently contract for educational programming within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). The group works together to attain common goals and remove barriers in order to further advance higher education in prison.

1 T.RDP/TDCJ (personal communication, April 1, 2024)

2 D. Zuniga (personal communication, May 16, 2024)

## 9. Windham School District

Windham School District (WSD) is the school district that operates within TDCJ. It is funded by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). WSD is the pipeline to post-secondary enrollment for individuals after they achieve a GED or high school diploma in TDCJ. Post-secondary education was overseen by WSD until the 2011-2012 legislative budget cuts.

WSD and certain vocational courses offered by colleges provide certifications in identical subject areas. However, Windham reports that postsecondary programs “target a different segment of the prospective student population. Windham Career and Technology Education (CTE) programs target residents who are often concurrently enrolled in high school equivalency programs.”<sup>1</sup>

### A. CTE Vocational

For qualifying students, the CTE vocational program offered by WSD gives students the chance to learn a trade or skill that is in demand in the job market. From welding and carpentry to culinary arts and automotive technology, the program offers a wide range of options for individuals. By participating in these vocational classes, students can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed to secure a job in a high-demand industry and start a successful career upon release.

### B. Dual Credit

For qualifying students enrolled in Windham’s high school program, the district offers dual-credit courses through official collaborations with Lee College and Central Texas College. Individuals can complete their high school education and obtain college credit at the same time thanks to these established arrangements.

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1 “Windham School District Self - Evaluation Report Instructions Sunset Advisory Commission June 2023” <https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/2023-09/WSD%20SER.pdf>

## 10. Conclusion

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Higher education in prison (HEP) programs in Texas are crucial in preparing incarcerated individuals for successful reintegration into society. By providing access to education and vocational training, these programs not only offer individuals the opportunity to secure stable employment upon release but also contribute to reducing recidivism rates and creating safer communities. It is essential for these programs to be student-centered, focusing on the unique needs and goals of the individuals involved. Additionally, state initiatives like Talent Strong Texas and TDCJ's 2030 Plan underscore the importance of collaboration and support for HEP programs, highlighting the potential positive impact on both individuals and the broader community.



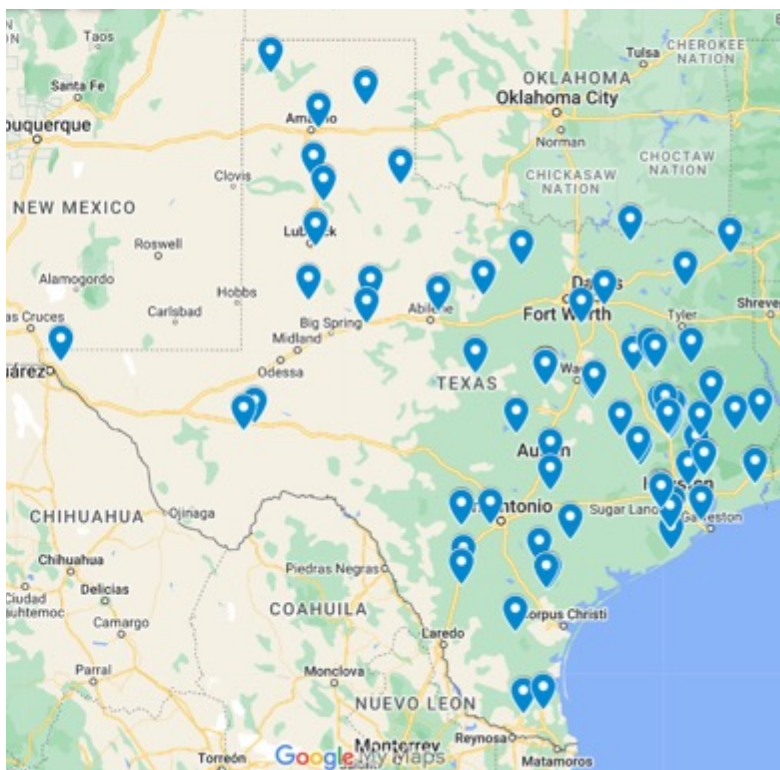
# Appendix I

## TDCJ Units Prison Units

Throughout history, the location of prisons has played a significant role in determining the access to higher educational programming for incarcerated individuals. It has been observed that prisons located near major cities have more opportunities for individuals to pursue higher education compared to those in remote areas.

Post-secondary programs are provided through contracts with colleges and universities serving the geographic areas where units are located. While prisons located in remote areas of Texas may struggle to provide the same level of educational programming due to the lack of resources and partnerships with educational institutions. It is important to note that there are potential solutions to address these challenges such as partnerships with local colleges and universities, support from the main campus, travel funding allocated for staff, and travel time counting for office hours.

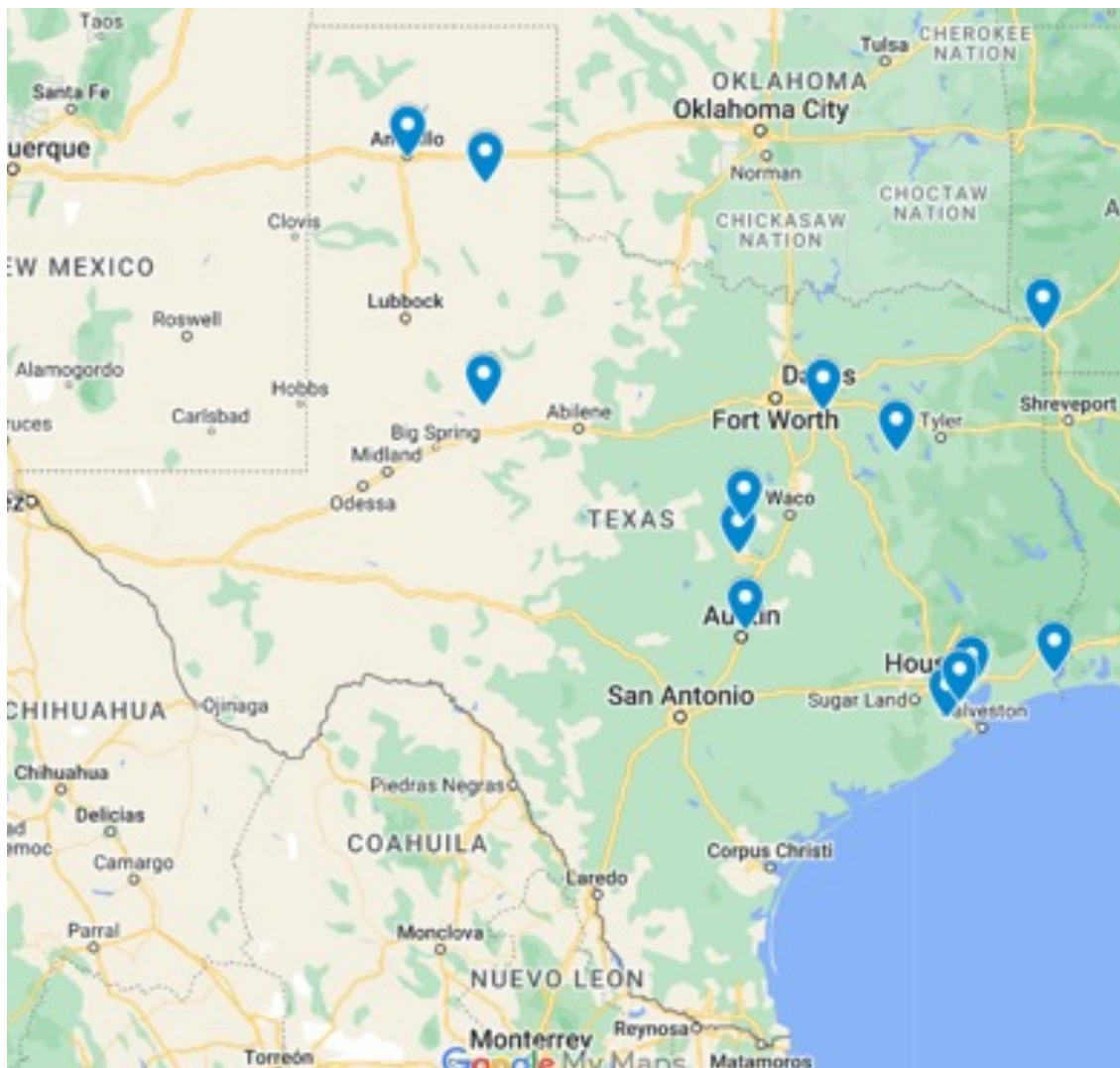
There are 100 TDCJ facilities in Texas.



# Appendix I

## Colleges / Universities

The 13 College Consortium is represented in blue on the map below. There are two continuing education programs (red) that are currently being offered inside TDCJ.



# Appendix II

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## List of Colleges / University and TDCJ Units

### Alvin Community College

Clemens Unit  
Jester III Unit  
Ramsey Unit  
Stringfellow Unit

### Amarillo College

Clements Unit

### Austin Community College

Coleman Unit

### Cedar Valley College

Estes Unit  
Hutchins State Jail

### Central Texas College

Crain Unit  
Hilltop Unit  
Hughes Unit  
Murray Unit  
O' Daniel Unit

### Clarendon College

Jordan Unit  
Roach Unit



# Appendix II

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## List of Colleges / University and TDCJ Units

### Lamar State College

Gist Unit  
Stiles Unit

### Lee College

Ellis Unit  
Ferguson Unit  
Holiday Unit  
Huntsville Unit  
Luther Unit  
Pack Unit  
Plane State Jail  
Wainwright Unit  
Wynne Unit

### Texarkana College

Telford Unit

### Texas Women's University

O' Daniel Unit

### Trinity Valley Community College

Beto Unit  
Coffield Unit  
Michael Unit  
Powledge Unit

### University of Houston - Clear Lake

Beto Unit  
Coffield Unit  
Ramsey Unit

# Appendix II

## List of Colleges / University and TDCJ Units

### Western Texas College

Daniel Unit  
Smith Unit  
Wallace Unit

#### Program Name

Texas Prison Education Initiative, TPEI

#### Institution(s) of Higher Education

The University of Texas at Austin

#### TDCJ Units

Coleman

#### Designated Gender

Female

#### Total # enrolled in spring 2024 programming

75

#### Total # who have completed credits:

- Spring 2024: 63 students completed credit-bearing courses (12 enrolled in a non-credit bearing course)
- Since 2017: Combined total of 541 credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing course slots offered to a total of 305 students
  - Includes 363 credit-bearing course slots offered to a total of 226 students

#### Other partners your program works with

Windham School District, UT Extension

#### Tuition Funding Sources

All courses are free to students as we fundraise to cover the cost of tuition, grants: Mellon Grant

# List of Colleges / University and TDCJ Units

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## Program Name

The Philosophy and Literature Circle

## Institution(s) of Higher Education

The University of Texas at San Antonio; Trinity University

## TDCJ Units

Dominguez State Jail (since 2019), Torres Unit (since 2020)

## Designated Gender

Male

## Total # enrolled in spring 2024 programming

39

## Total # that have completed certificates

- 135 - Dominguez State Jail
- 82 - Torres Unit

Total: 217

## Other partners your program works with

Participants at both sites earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) in Writing from UTSA Professional and Continuing Education

## Tuition Funding Sources

The program at Dominguez is sponsored by UTSA and the program at Torres is sponsored by Trinity University, with additional, generous support from Humanities Texas, the Delmas Foundation, and private donors

## Author Credit Page

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### Alexa Garza, Policy Analyst, The Education Trust-Texas

Alexa's passion for advocacy is rooted in her personal experience of incarceration and the stigma she faced in her community upon release. She hopes to use storytelling as a way to change the narrative around system involvement. Alexa aspires to provide her unique perspective to elevate the often-neglected voices of incarcerated women of color and their lack of support in pursuing higher education while in the system. She is eager to participate in research and analysis that will support effective policy reform that will provide access to higher education for all individuals impacted by the justice system.

Alexa holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in business administration and has completed certification through the Library of Congress as a braille transcriber.







**ALLIANCE**

FOR HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
IN PRISON