

Dallas County Sheriff's Department

El Centro College

Jail Education Program Evaluation

Evaluation of El Centro College Jail Education Program

Prepared by Jane VanDeventer
Spring, 1999

INTRODUCTION

In 1973, the Dallas County Sheriff's Department (SD) established a partnership with El Centro Community College (ECC) to offer college classes to inmates at the Dallas County Jails. El Centro College is one of seven campuses composing the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD). The SD and DCCCD are governed by Dallas County Commissioners Court.

The expected outcome of the Jail Education Program (JE) is to provide opportunities for male and female inmates to begin educational rehabilitation during their incarceration through college credit courses. The intent of the Jail Program is to provide education while strengthening work skills and increase self-esteem along with self-reliability. The ultimate goal of the Jail Education Program is to decrease recidivism, whether or not an inmate will return to incarceration.

I was interested in evaluating the program because I have been an adjunct instructor for JE a number of years, and three years ago was the primary force in introducing computers to the jail setting. Although ECC does program and discipline reviews, JE is not included in that data.

This evaluation can be used as an important tool when planning new directions and assessing program needs. The information could also influence the required annual budget request from the SD along with the information sent to Commissioners Court to pass the funding levels. Students, instructors and JE Director can suggest ideas to strengthen the program and have it operate more efficiently.

The Participant - Oriented Model was used because it appeared to have the most natural fit for this setting. According to Trochim (1999), Participant-Oriented models, as the term suggests, emphasize the central importance of the evaluation participants, especially clients and users of the program or technology. This type of evaluation allows for the reality of the setting. The jail setting has many variables different from traditional education. This informal process is also conducive for use with this population. In particular, the Responsive Evaluation within Participant-Oriented Model addresses the concerns and issues of the stakeholders. This approach lends to interpretation of the realities in the program and to the reactions, concerns and issues of the participants.

The Director of Inmate Program (SD), and the Director of Technology (ECC) were consulted about the evaluation format, techniques, and collection of data.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to research, education, drug treatment, and employment are the key factors that influence recidivism rates.

"...Gaither conducted an in-house evaluation of Texas Department of Corrections college programs and concluded participation in the junior college program definitely results in lower recidivism rates."
(Taylor, 1992, p. 36)

"There is consistently an inverse relationship between educational participation time during incarcerations and recidivism rates." (Harer, 1994, p.4)

"40% of inmates do not have a consistent employment history before incarceration." ..."Inmates need to learn job skills and develop thinking strategies that will help them avoid committing crimes...By the year 2000, 71% of new jobs developed will require skills associated with post-high school preparation..."
(Tracy, 1993, p. 66)

THE STUDY

Evaluation Objects

Only students currently enrolled in classes during spring of 1999 (February - April) were evaluation participants. Students and instructors evaluated the Jail Education Program determine strengths, weaknesses, and possible solutions for those weaknesses. The JE program itself was evaluated with no inclusion of the Sheriff's Department policies or issues relating directly to the SD. Within a program year there are 750 (seven hundred-fifty) students in approximately 50 classes.

Audience/Stakeholders

The people who will be interested in the evaluation are the students, the instructors, the Director of Inmate Programs and the Jail Education Director. The information will possibly be of interest to Commissioners Court, and ECC will include the evaluation in an upcoming ECC site evaluation.

Goals/Objectives of the Evaluation

The goal of the evaluation was to interpret the strengths, weakness, and possible means of strengthening the program as determined by the instructors and students.

Instructors were asked years of teaching experience and experience in JE. Students were asked educational level. Students and instructors were asked to contrast their experience with traditional educational programs and the JE. Instructors were asked why they continued to teach in JE. All were asked what factors were barriers or supports to the program suggestions for strengthening the program.

Instrumentation/Data Collection

Data was collected from 28 (twenty-eight) male students, 13 (thirteen) female students, and 9 (nine) instructors. Some classes had just ended for the semester, which accounts for the low student population. This makes it appear there is a high instructor:student ratio; there is not. Average classes are 25 students per instructor.

I collected data while visiting all classes. Students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 5 (five) questions. Instructors collected data from students who were absent when they returned to class. Questionnaires were distributed or faxed to instructors.

Each questionnaire was 5 (five) pages with one question per page. Participants were encouraged to be as lengthy or as brief as they wished. Dividing one question per page facilitated easier data entry.

After questionnaires were returned, each page of one questionnaire was marked with a questionnaire number. Men, women, and instructors were marked with different colors. In this manner, all questionnaires could be reassembled if necessary, and it also formed some, though limited, control of maintaining retrieved reply data on open ended questions.

Questionnaires were disassembled and responses were input into the computer for all responses of like questions per population. After that, responses were analyzed to look for similar responses, and ultimately trends.

The data collected is reflected in the following charts.

Educational Status of Students	Male	Female	Total
Less than HS or GED	5	6	11
GED	7	4	11
HS	8	2	10
Business / Vocational Training / JE	6	3	9
Some College	10	2	12
College Degree	1	1	2

Is Jail Education Different?	28 MALE STUDENTS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Fewer distractions	5	+		18
Preferred the 6-8 week courses offered in jail	4	+		14
Educators cared more about students in jail	4	+		14
Jail environment: more relaxing	2	+		7
Slower pace	2	+		7
It's free	2	+		7
Not coed	2	N		7
No clubs	2	N		7
Jail environment stressful	8	-		28
Officers are negative about education for inmates	3	-		10
No campus support and services	2	-		7

Is Jail Education Different?	13 FEMALE STUDENTS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Yes, easier	4	+		31
Yes, eager to learn and better myself	4	+		31
Yes, drug free	2	+		15
Appreciate being treated like humans	2	+		15
Not much	5	-		38
No, eager to learn and you get what you put in to it	4	-		31

What was your relationship with teachers?	28 MALE STUDENTS			
Is it the same in Jail Education?	Responses	+	N or -	%
Better, more approachable	10	+		36
Respect all teachers	8	+		29
Same	5	N		18
They are not in the same world	3	N		11
No education in the free world	4	-		14
The system limits them	3	-		11
Less approachable	2	-		7

What was your relationship with teachers?	13 FEMALE STUDENTS			
Is it the same in Jail Education?	Responses	+	N or -	%
Better	5	+		38
Give me a sense of worth	2	+		15
Teaching me something besides dope and prostitution	1	+		8
Same	4	N		31

What are the barriers to your learning?	28 MALE STUDENTS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
None	9		N	32
Outdated equipment	5	-		18
Jail system	4	-		14
Lack of school time	4	-		14
Worry about other problems such as release	4	-		14
Other students	4	-		14
Not enough equipment	1	-		4

What are the barriers to your learning?	13 FEMALE STUDENTS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Want more time in class	5	+		38
A person can learn no matter where they are	1	+		8
Too loud in the tanks	2	N		15
More classes	3	-		23
Being moved from tank to tank	2	-		15

What factors add to the success of this program?	28 MALE STUDENTS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Second chance / Desire to succeed / Better myself	10	+		36
Instructors	5	+		21
No outside pressures	2	+		7
Time to study	2	+		7
Ten-key , Accounting	2	+		7
Hands-on training	1	+		4

What factors add to the success of this program?	13 FEMALE STUDENTS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Self-esteem / Attitude / Feel like a person	5	+		38
Teacher	4	+		31
Staying in one tank	1	+		8
Working at own pace	1	+		8
Being given second chance	1	+		8

Number of years in Jail Education.	9 INSTRUCTORS
	Number of responses
1.5	1
2	2
4	1
8	1
12	1
17	1

Contrast teaching in the traditional programs and the Jail Program	9 INSTRUCTORS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Better participation among jail students	3	+		33
Easier to solve behavior problems	1	+		11
Requires more flexibility	2	N		22
Attitude of guards	2	N		22
Students being transferred	2	N		22
Inmate mind-set	1	N		11
Lack of books	2	-		22
Physical restrictions of jail	2	-		22
Less prepared students	2	-		22
Depressing environment	2	-		22
Lower end equipment	1	-		11

Why do you continue to teach in Jail Education?	9 INSTRUCTORS			
	Responses	+	N or -	%
Sense of helping society	6	+		67
Student feedback / progress	5	+		56
Diverse population	3	+		33
Subject matter	3	+		33
Personal growth	1	+		11
Flexibility	1	+		11
Easy to solve behavior problems	1	+		11

What factors impede the program?	9 INSTRUCTORS		
	Responses	+, N or -	%
Lack of textbooks	5	-	56
Old equipment	4	-	44
Officer attitude	4	-	44
Student transfers	4	-	44
Money, supplies	2	-	22
Less prepared students	2	-	22
Over qualified and blended students	2	-	22
Competing jail programs(drug, GED, and feeding times)	2	-	22
Limited courses	1	-	11
Personal problems	1	-	11
No follow up	1	-	11

What factors support the program?	9 INSTRUCTORS		
	Responses	+, N or -	%
Student appreciation	5	+	56
Less distractions for inmates	4	+	44
Jail coordinator	4	+	44
Flexibility	3	+	33
Use of technology	3	+	33
Caring instructors	2	+	22
Some officers	2	+	22
Students placed in same tanks	2	+	22
Fast-track courses	2	+	22
Variety of courses	1	+	11
Free for students	1	+	11
Know students better and their barriers	1	+	11
Other services	1	+	11

What changes would you like in the program?	9 INSTRUCTORS	
	Number of responses	%
More books and materials	9	100
Better computer hardware	5	56
More software	3	33
Understanding guards	2	22
Students arriving to school on time	2	22
Course structure	1	11
Campus support	1	11
Discipline	1	11
Outside speakers	1	11
Follow-up on students	1	11

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Following are examples of the responses placed on grids in order to look for trends or patterns in the evaluation.

Comments were sometimes very telling. For example, sample comments from the female students:

"My drug free mind is clearer and eager to learn."

"Jail Education really teaches us more than what they did back then. The jail has computers, and everywhere you go has computers."

"The simple fact that we are allowed to take this course is, in itself, a 'success'. If a woman or man can better themselves...it can benefit an individual both monetarily and in self esteem."

"My son recently got a computer for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. When I get out, I'd like to be able to play games with him."

"I'm given a chance I did not have on the outside."

Sample of comments from male students:

"I find that coming to class and applying myself, suddenly everything becomes very clear, and I can forget for a time all of the problems. I seem to have and even able to visualize a life very much different from the one I previously lived."

"If you want to learn, you can learn anywhere."

"This is my first time in a classroom in 20 (twenty) years."

"I am taking classes I never would have been able to take in the free world."

Sample of instructors' comments:

"The students are, in general, less prepared and less motivated to learn than students in a traditional college setting. There are always exceptions, however, and some students in the JE program work harder than some students in the traditional class settings with modern equipment."

"You are aware of who you are working with...You may be working with the same kind of person in traditional settings, but you do not know it."

"I have a captive group of minds that are willing and wanting to learn."

"Most of the students are on different educational levels, which means the teacher has to be a little more creative."

"If I can help one inmate turn his life around by giving him a positive classroom experience, then I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have not only made things better for that individual but for society in general."

"I enjoy a diverse population."

"We have no control over the inmates; we must follow rules and regulations whether they are just or unjust."

"I am more in touch with the student's needs or barriers."

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions drawn from the categories include:

- ⇒ Students and Instructors have an overall favorable attitude about Jail Education.
- ⇒ Participants were unified in expressing the need for more teaching supplies and better hardware, instructors 100% and males 22%.
- ⇒ Almost all students noted wanting more time in the classroom, males 23%, females 38%.
- ⇒ Many students expressed statements of hope, and of being given a second chance to create a better life circumstance, males 36% and females 38%.
- ⇒ 67 % of the instructors express a somewhat altruistic attitude, one of contributing to society by "helping even one student".
- ⇒ Students and instructors implied the guards have an effect on the classroom, instructors.
- ⇒ The jail environment impacts the students in a dichotomy. Students have more stress from being in jail, and fewer distractions from being in jail.
- ⇒ Instructors (33%) expressed that there is better participation among jail education students compared to traditional students.

The implications of this evaluation support the recommendation that El Centro College and the Sheriff's Department should continue Jail Education. Jail Education could be strengthened by enhancing the curriculum, adding teaching supplies, and when possible, upgrading equipment. Upgrading the equipment is in progress. The focus can shift to enhancing curriculum, revising syllabi, lesson plans and supporting materials for students and instructors.

Jail Education has a positive effect on Jail Education instructors and their perceptions on how the program impacts the students.

REFERENCES:

Brief History of the Washington State Reformatory Computer Program. The Chronicle of Higher Education <http://chronicle.com> visited 2/9/99

Hara, K. (1995) "Quantitative and qualitative research approaches in education" Education volume 115 no. 3, 351-356.

Harer, M. Section Chief. (1994) *Recidivism Among Federal Prison Releasees*, Basic Research and Evaluation, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation, Washington, DC, March 11, 1994: U. S. Government Printing Office.

Introduction to Evaluation, Bill Trochim Center for Social Research Methods <http://trochim.humna.cornell.edu> visited 2/11/99

Looking at Educational Evaluation: What Good Is it? <http://bardo.art.uiuc.edu/arted/arted204/evaluation.html> visited 2/11/99

Ryan, T. A. (August 8, 1994) *Impact of Prison Education on Recidivism*, Presented at the American Correctional Association Congress, St. Louis, Missouri.

Taylor, J. (1992) "Post-Secondary Correctional Education: An Evaluation of Effectiveness and Efficiency", *Journal of Correctional Education* volume 43 issue 3, 132-141.

Tracy, A. (1993) International Organization Works to Improve Education Programming. *Corrections Today*, February, 81-86.